Kino no Tabi Volume4

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 4

キノの旅Ⅳ

the Beautiful World

歌声が聞こえる。そこは、紅い世界だった。一面に紅い花が咲き乱れ、隙間なく大地を埋め尽くしている。

何もない、ただ蒼いだけの空が広がる。

……紅い草原に、再び歌声が聞こえた。

そしてそれが終わった時、最初に聞こえた声が訊ねる。

「これからどうするの？」

別の声は、

「いつかと同じさ。どこかへ行こう」

すかさず答えた。

「そうだね。そうしよう」

最初の声が、嬉しそうに同意した。

そして言う。

「そろそろホントに起こしてほしいなあ。キノ」

人間キノと言葉を話す二輪車エルメスの旅の話。短編連作の形で綴られる、大人気新感覚ノベル第４弾!!

し-8-4
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時雨沢恵一
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（星空のコスプレをする筆者）

時雨沢恵一（しぐさわけいいち）

1972年製造。今住んでいるアパートももうすぐ二年。悪くはないが広くもない。より本を貯め込める場所を目指して引っ越しを計画中。そう言えばここ10年、3年以上一つの部屋に住んだことがないことに気がついた。今度住む部屋は、×××××が×××××できればいいなあと本気で思います、はい。

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅱ　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅲ　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅳ　the Beautiful World

イラスト:黒星紅白（くろぼしこうはく）

1974年生まれ。性別：男。九州在住。プレイステーションソフト「サモンナイト」のキャラクターデザインを手がける。フリーでも色々やっています。趣味：プラモデル買い、釣り。

カバー/旭印刷

キノの旅 IV

— the Beautiful World —

時雨沢 恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA
イラスト：黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION：KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

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プロローグ「紅い海の真ん中で・b」
—Blooming Prairie・b—

歌声が聞こえる。
そこは、紅い世界だった。
一面に紅い花が咲き乱れ、隙間なく大地を埋め尽くしている。
何もない、ただ蒼いだけの空が広がる。

草原には、誰の姿も見えない。
それでも歌声は、紅と蒼の空間を流れていく。
それは、ゆっくりで、アップテンポで、なめらかな歌だった。
楽しそうに、悲しそうに、歌は続く。

きれいな高音が伸びて、歌は終わった。
すぐにどこからか、
「アンコール」
声が聞こえた。

「もう二、三曲聞きたい。もしくは……」
声が言った。別の声、さっきまで歌っていた声が聞く。
「もしくは？」
「起こして」
最初の声が答える。
「あはは。分かった。じゃあもう少し――」

紅い草原に、再び歌声が聞こえた。

そしてそれが終わった時、最初に聞こえた声が訊ねる。
「これからどうするの？」
別の声は、
「いつかと同じさ。どこかへ行こう」
すかさず答えた。
「そうだね。そうしよう」
最初の声が、嬉しそうに同意した。
そして言う。
「そろそろホントに起こしてほしいなあ。キノ」

第一話　「像のある国」—Angel?—

ある時、谷にある小さな国に、旅人が来た。

モトラド（注・二輪車。空を飛ばないものだけを指す）に乗ってやって来た若い旅人は、豊かできれいな農地と、歴史ある古く狭い街並みを楽しそうに見て回った。そして、広場にある木で造られた像の前で足を止めた。

単純に人間の格好をした像で、手には長い棒を持っていた。足下に、なんだかよく分からない生き物も造られている。

若い旅人は、住人に聞いた。

「これは何ですか？」

住人は、笑顔で答える。

「これは、昔空から降りてきて、国を救ってくれた天使の像です。人々を苦しめる二十二人の悪魔を、棍棒の一振りであっという間に退治して、この国に安穏をもたらしてくれたんです。そして、空に還られました」

「天使？　空から降りてきた？　何それ？」

モトラドが聞いた。

住人は目を細めて、こう答える。

「お伽話ですよ。これからこの国に伝わる――」

第二話　「××××××」—Solo—

その場所は、すてきな草原でした。
大地を埋め尽くす草は、花も、静かに風に揺れています。
一本だけあるのは、真っ直ぐな道でした。
白い道が、どこまでもどこまでもどこまでも伸びています。どこへ続いているのかは分かりません。
一台のモトラドが、道を走っていました。
荷物をたくさん積んでいます。
運転手である旅人が進む先に何かを見つけて、スピードを落としました。

道端で手を上げているのは、小さな子供でした。
モトラドが止まりました。その小さな子供は、
「連れていってください」
そう言いました。モトラドが即座に言います。
「ダメだよ。もう乗るところがないから」
旅人が訊ねます。
「どこから来たの？」
子供は答えません。
「どこへ行くの？」
子供は答えません。
「キミの名前は？」
「××××××」
子供は答えました。そして、もう一度同じことを言います。
「連れていってください」
「ダメだよ。もう乗るところがないから」
モトラドが即座に言いました。
旅人も、うめくように言います。
「ボクには、誰かの命を預かることなん

てできないよ。自分一人の命を守るので精一杯なんだ。だから連れていけない。どうにかして、諦めてくれると嬉しい。

エゴだよ……。これはエゴだ」

「どのみち二人乗りで旅はムリさ」

モトラドが静かに言いました。

旅人は子供に近づいて、しゃがんで、子供の顔を見ながらこう言いました。

「さよならだ。×××××ちゃん」

旅人はモトラドに跨って、すぐに走り出しました。

その場所は、すてきな草原でした。大地を埋め尽くす草は、花も、静かに風に揺れています。

一本だけあるのは、真っ直ぐな道でした。白い道が、どこまでもどこまでもどこまでも伸びています。どこへ続いているのかは分かりません。

そこには小さな子供が残されました。

いつまでもいつまでも、そこには小さな子供が残されました。

"I knew not this place and aimed for a dream land;
I arrived at a dream land and knew not the place."

— Wherever I go, there I am. —

“Amidst a Crimson Sea・b” —Blooming Prairieb—

Prologue

"Amidst a Crimson Sea · b"

— Blooming Prairie · b —

A singing voice could be heard.

It was a crimson world.

Deep red flowers covered the surface of the ground as far as the eye could see.

There was nothing, except for the expanse of blue sky.

—

No one could be seen on the prairie.

Even so, the singing voice flowed through the space of crimson and blue.

It was a song which was slow yet lively.

The song continued in joy and melancholy.

—

Finally, the song ended with a beautiful, extended, high-pitched note.

Soon after the song had ended, a voice could be heard calling out,

“Encore!”

“I’d love to hear one or two more songs, or…”

“Or what?” asked the voice which had been singing.

“Or you could pick me up,” the first voice replied.

“Ahaha. I understand, then just one more——”

The singing voice was heard once more throughout the crimson prairie.

—

When the song ended, the first voice asked,

“So, what are we gonna do now?”

“Just like always, let’s go somewhere,” the other voice replied immediately.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” the first voice gladly agreed.

And continued.

“About time you picked me up, Kino.”

“A Land with a Statue” —Angel?—

Chapter One

"Land With a Statue"

— Angel? —

Once upon a time, a traveler came to a small country in a valley.

The traveler who came riding a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was looking around leisurely at the rich and beautiful farmlands and at the old and narrow historical town roads. They stopped in front of a wooden statue in the plaza.

The statue simply had the appearance of a human, and it was holding a long stick in its hand. At its feet, there was a creature which can’t be clearly identified.

The young traveler asked a resident, “What is this?”

The resident answered with a smile.

“This is the statue of an angel which descended from the sky a long time ago to save the country. With his club , he quickly exterminated twenty-two demons that tormented the people, and restored peace in this country. And then he went back to the sky.”

“Angel? Descended from the sky? What’s that?” the motorrad asked.

The resident narrowed his eyes, and answered,

“It’s a fairy tale. It has been handed down in this country up to now——”

“×××××” —Solo—

Chapter Two
“xxxxx”
— Solo —

There was a beautiful grassland. The grass carpeting the ground, as well as the wild flowers, danced as a gentle breeze swept across the field.

On this field was a perfectly straight road. The white road stretched out on and on and on. As to where this road leads to, it was not known.

A motorrad was running on it. It was heavily loaded with luggage.

The riding traveler noticed something and slowed down. It was a small child by the wayside, raising his hands.

The motorrad stopped. The child spoke,

"Please take me with you."

"No way! There is no more room," the motorrad immediately said.

The driver asked,

"Where did you come from?"

The child did not answer.

"Where are you going?"

The child did not answer.

"What is your name?"

"×××××"

The child replied and said the same thing once more.

"Please take me with you."

"No way! There is no more room," the motorrad immediately said.

The traveler spoke, almost in a grunt,

“I cannot be in charge of somebody’s life. I already have my hands full looking after myself. And so, I cannot bring you along, you should stop your notion about it. I am selfish… I am very selfish.”

“It is not possible to travel with two people on anyway ,” the motorrad chirped in.

The traveler approached the child, squatted down, and while looking at the child’s face,

“Goodbye, ×××××.”

With this, the traveler rode the motorrad and left.

There was a beautiful grassland. The grass carpeting the ground, as well as the wild flowers, danced as a gentle breeze swept across the field.

On this field was a perfectly straight road. The white road stretched out on and on and on. As to where this road leads to, it was not known.

There, a small child has been left behind.

There, a small child has been left behind forever.

“A Land of Two People” —Even a Dog Doesn’t Eat—

Chapter Three

"A Land of Two People"

— Even a Dog Doesn't Eat —

"Step right up! Welcome to our country, traveler!" The guard said this with genuine enthusiasm.

"These are some questions we ask people entering the country. Please answer them. It's nothing serious; just write the first thing that you think of."

By himself, the guard was waiting inside a small post in front of the gates of the tall castle walls. As soon as the traveler arrived, he immediately presented a thick packet of papers. A pen too.

The traveler was slightly taken aback and stared at the papers.

The traveler was in her teens. She had short, black, unkempt hair, but her face with its big eyes had a fearless look. Goggles hanged down her neck.

She wore a black jacket and a wide belt with some pouches around her waist. On her right thigh, there was a holster for a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol). Inside was a revolver with an octagonal barrel.

The traveler asked the guard, "Just me is okay? He is also going to be entering."

The traveler then pointed with her thumb to a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) parked behind her. It was heavily loaded with a bag, a sleeping bag, and traveling luggage.

"Just you is fine. Let's see… what was your name?"

"Kino," the traveler Kino spoke, and then pointed once again to the motorrad.

"Over there is my partner, Hermes."

"Pleased to meet you," the motorrad named Hermes greeted from a distance. The guard bowed in greeting.

"Again, welcome to our country. As for the questionnaire, Miss Kino would be good enough. It may take some time, but if you can please try to answer everything. You may use the chair and table over here."

"Okay but… is this really a requirement for entering the country?" confirmed Kino.

"That is correct," the guard nodded firmly.

Kino said she understood, sat on the chair, and began looking through the stack of papers.

It asked things like name, age, sex, height, and weight. Then it asked about hobbies, favorite foods, favorite colors, tastes in music, self-conscious qualities, thinking style, and clothing preferences.

Then it asked what you can see in a picture that looked like an ink spill; what kind of animal would you rather be; how you feel about watching boxing; what you think about farm work; whether you like children; wake up early; like raising pets; tend to cry when watching a play or reading a story; prefer cats or dogs; dream in color; worry about being judged by others; mind living together with elderly people; like gambling, and so on.

"…Sigh"

Although Kino sighed several times the whole time, she was able to answer all of the questions. Then she returned it to the waiting guard with a smile.

Afterwards, the guard took Kino's picture, as it was necessary to complete the inspection papers. He took one

frontal bust shot and one full body shot. She was asked to smile, but no matter how you looked at it, she had a sour look on her face.

"Okay, thank you very much."

Finally, she was granted an entry permit, and the thick and heavy gates were opened. Kino tapped awake Hermes, who was soundly sleeping.

It was nearly sunset by the time Kino entered the country. To make matters worse, dark clouds have started to form. Kino looked for a cheap hotel and went in. Before long it was raining. Kino gave up on going out for the day. She ate a meal, took a shower, and went to bed.

The next day, Kino woke at dawn break.

The rain had let up. Kino did some light exercises in her room, and then practiced with her persuader called ' Canon'.

After having her breakfast in the hotel, Kino tapped Hermes awake. She left her luggage to the care of the hotel, and Kino decided to go out for some sightseeing.

It was not a very big country. Castle walls surrounded the level land. The streets were neatly divided and lined up abundantly with plain concrete buildings that didn't seem to have any history.

"It's not a very pretty country, is it?" said Hermes.

Kino asked people walking down the street about the country's highlights. The replies were about the same.

"What a traveler would find interesting, eh…. Well, it' s a very safe country."

"….That's a tough question, but if I had to say then…. That really is a tough question."

"The alcohol is great, I suppose. Hmm? You don't drink? Then there's nothing really special…"

"There's none. This is a new country, so it's not very good for sightseeing."

Kino rode Hermes around randomly. Eventually they reached the edge of the country, and turned back.

Kino decided to stop by an open street café for some tea. As she finished her break and returned to the sidewalk where Hermes was parked, Kino heard someone shouting.

Kino and Hermes turned towards the voices. In front of a ramp leading to the roadway was a young couple yelling at each other. Things quickly became violent.

"What's going on?" Kino said, surprised. Hermes who seemed to be enjoying himself spoke.

"As you can see, it's a street fight. If I had to say, then the man has the advantage with the hooks he keeps on sending. But that lady's kicks are pretty good too. Ah, that left high kick just decided it."

"Nobody asked for a play-by-play commentary…"

"Should we stop them?"

"Hey, break it up. Let's just talk this out," said Kino as she approached them.

"Ah! Miss traveler, what is it you intend on doing?"

From behind, a young police officer in uniform called out to Kino and stopped her.

"You're just in time officer," said Hermes.

"There are people fighting. You can stop them instead, " said Kino.

The officer shook his head. "It's probably best if we leave them be."

"Is that really okay?"

"Yes, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong. Besides, it looks like they're already finished."

When Kino looked again, she saw that the fight was settled. The couple was walking away together.

The officer warned Kino, "Miss traveler, there's one request I have of you. Even if you see a man and a woman fighting, you must never interfere. In this

country, nobody gets involved in couples or spouses who are fighting. The fights settle before becoming serious anyways."

"That's really how it is?" Kino asked doubtingly.

The officer smiled and said, "Even if by chance you did get involved, I'm not sure you would gain anything from it. Even so, please enjoy your visit in our country. You won't find something like it anywhere else, and there are many good places. Now then, if you'll excuse me."

The officer saluted and left.

"Good places? Where?" muttered Hermes.

Kino had a satisfying lunch, and then she refilled Hermes ' fuel tank. After a short argument, they both agreed to end the day's sightseeing and rest at the hotel.

While waiting at a stop light, a voice from the car next to them called out.

"Hello traveler!"

The driver was a man in his thirties wearing glasses and a suit with a tie.

"Miss traveler, if you like, won't you come over to my house for some tea? I'm on my way home right now, it's very close. What do you say? You can meet my wife too; we'd love to talk with you about traveling and our country."

"We're free now so why not?" said Hermes. Kino nodded. She told the man that they would follow his car.

The man's house was one of two-storey apartments connected side by side.

The man's wife came out of the entryway to greet them. She had long hair and a beautiful face.

"This is my wife. A beauty isn't she?" The man said this quite happily then kissed his wife on the cheek.

"Please make yourselves at home, miss traveler and mister motorrad," greeted the wife with a smile. Kino returned the greeting, and introduced herself and Hermes.

The man showed everyone in, and the wife, who had stayed behind to close the door, caught a glimpse of Canon on Kino's right thigh. Her eyes opened wide for a moment, then she spoke quietly. "Miss traveler, you carry a persuader?"

"Hmm? Ah, if you don't like it I will put it away," Kino hastily said. The woman shook her head with a smile.

"Not at all, I'm fine with it as is. Traveling is dangerous isn't it? How long will you be in this country?"

"Until tomorrow, I will probably leave in the morning, " answered Kino.

"I see…," the woman muttered softly.

The man offered Kino a seat in the dining room. Hermes stood behind on his center stand.

The man called his wife who was in the kitchen. " Bring our guests something to drink. Thanks."

"Of course, sorry to leave you waiting," responded the wife with a lively tone.

The man politely spoke to Kino. "Welcome to my house. I don't get much chance to speak with foreigners. Miss traveler, mister motorrad, what do you think of this country?"

"It's boring," Hermes said straightaway.

The man laughed, "Hahaha. You're a frank one, aren't you, mister motorrad. To tell you the truth, this country *is* boring. There's no beautiful scenery or deep history to be found here. But it's a good place. It's peaceful and there's little crime. We can live our lives carefree. On my days off I always play tennis with my friends."

The woman set down a tray, and carried over a bottle and cups. It was alcohol. She filled the man's cup to the brim. The man gave a surprised look, but then quickly emptied the glass in a single gulp and let out a gasp. His face slowly began turning red. The man asked his wife by his side, "Hey, where's the snacks?"

"Ah, sorry, hold on," the wife said as she turned back.

At that moment, the man shouted angrily, "Why am I waiting?! It should already be out you idiot!"

The man stood up, grabbed his wife's hair with both hands, and dragged her.

"Eek!" The woman yelped and the two of them disappeared into the next room.

The sound of something being hit was heard several times.

"Bitch! Bitch! Stupid bitch!"

The man's shouts were heard. The slanders continued.

"You fool! Be more considerate! Are you trying to embarrass me?! Are you trying to be lazy?! You think people are just going to feed you?! Hey! Are you listening? *Sand!*"

For a short moment, there was no noise. Then suddenly the man's voice was heard,

"Whatever, just hurry up and cook something. Make it snappy. I'm in a good mood today so I'll let you off with this. Now hurry up idiot!"

There was a thud. It sounded like something was dropped.

The man returned to the dining room completely red-faced. He sat down, suddenly looking rather embarrassed, and politely spoke. "I'm very sorry you had to see such an unsightly thing. She tries a little harder every time, but she can't help being a fool. Please don't take it against her, and if you can, please forgive her. Ah, that's right, miss traveler, how about a drink?"

"No, thank you, I don't drink," Kino said. Her expression has not changed from before.

"Ah, well would you like one of these?" The man offered the biscuits sitting on a small plate on the table.

Kino thanked the man, picked one up, and put it in her mouth. At that moment, the woman came staggering into the dining room. Her hair was a mess, and she was holding the side of her forehead. She walked towards the kitchen like a ghost.

"Bring the traveler some tea! Hurry up!" the man shouted at her back.

Staying in a good mood, the man poured himself a drink and gulped it down. He became talkative, and his tone cheery.

"Man, I'm jealous of travelers! Really jealous! They travel around, going to all sorts of places. Yep. You know , I've also ridden on a motorrad before. The engine had exhaust pipes on both sides…. I don't mean to brag, but I was pretty good at it too. But, to be honest I did fall over

too. I was only borrowing it so I was only able to ride it a bit. Yep… **hic*!* I wanted to go on a journey. Hey miss traveler, traveling must be fun, eh?"

Kino gave the man a smile. "Yes, very. You can witness the various differences in each country's customs ."

"Kino thinks so too," Hemes muttered inaudibly.

"That's right!"

The man slapped his knee. He wobbled as he arose from his seat, and exclaimed with a smile.

"Different countries. There's so many of them and you get to tour them. Yep. It sure is nice…. You have to do it while you're still young! Oops!"

The man started leaning forward and lost his balance. His arm hit the wife who was carrying out the food. The woman dropped the plate, and the food completely scattered on the floor.

"Ah!" shouted the woman.

The man's expression quickly changed. He glared at his wife with an almost demon-like rage.

"What do you mean, 'Ah!'? Hey! Stupid! Don't just stand there! The snacks are ruined! Ahhh! You're useless! Trash! Pick that up and eat it!"

Kino ate another biscuit.

The man grabbed the woman's long hair, pulled her towards himself, and dragged her off into the next room in this state.

"You stupid bitch!"

A number of slapping sounds were heard, and the man's jeering continued.

"Seriously! You can't even bring one snack to our guest! You're useless, a burden to everyone! …Tsk! I can't believe I'm even with someone like you! Say something! Hey stupid! *Sand!* Are you listening?"

There was silence for a moment.

"Your stupidity makes me sick! Our guests came all this way! Who do you think you should thank for the food you eat? Whose money is keeping you alive? Who's working? Eh? …Forget it, I'm tired from work! I'm going to sleep! I want you to clean up! Make that floor sparkle! Got it?"

Then, the sound of something dropping was heard once more.

The man came back to the dining room.

"I'm very sorry to trouble you, miss traveler, mister motorrad. I'll have to say goodnight here. I enjoyed our conversation. Please make yourselves comfortable. If you need anything, feel free to command my wife — even though she's really useless."

The man left these courteous words and entered the next room.

"Get to work!"

The wife was dragged back out. The spot on her forehead where she was first hit has swelled. Blood was coming out from a cut on her lip. The man flung his wife on the floor as if she were garbage.

The man disappeared into the room with shaky steps. Soon, his tottering footsteps were heard climbing up the stairs.

Kino glanced at Hermes, and then stood up from her chair. Kino attempted to help the woman who was cleaning up the food that had fallen on the floor.

"It's fine, please stop." The woman held back Kino.

"Sorry, but it's all right. Please return to your seat."

"She's right, Kino. There's no need for you to help her pick those up."

Hermes said from behind. Kino looked at Hermes once more and sat on the chair.

While restraining the blood spreading from her mouth, the woman picked up the scattered food, and wiped the floor.

The woman cleared up the table, washed her hands in the kitchen, and wiped her face. Afterwards, she handed out a cup of tea to Kino. Kino thanked her as she received it.

"Please wait for a while."

The woman left these words and went out of the dining room. The sound of climbing up the stairs, and then of climbing down, was heard.

The woman returned to the dining room and sat opposite Kino. There was a conspicuous swelling above her right eye, and the blood on her lower lip has clotted.

"You must have been surprised…," the woman opened her mouth to speak.

"Well, sort of. But you see, this morning, we saw a couple relentlessly fighting right in the middle of the street. I tried to stop them, but a police officer stopped me."

"I see…"

"This country is just like this, isn't it?" Hermes said, and the woman nodded once.

"Yes. In this country, it was custom and law that couples shouldn't hold back from each other. For that reason, fighting with your spouse is not a crime as long as no one gets killed.

"……" "……"

"But this isn't something to be surprised about. After all, it has always been like this even in olden times."

"I see," Kino said.

"Hey, why did you marry that kind of person anyway ?" Hermes asked forthright.

The woman smiled. It was a smile of self-mockery mixed with amusement, as if she had been asked the same question many times already.

"That's so true. If I had the choice, would I have married such a man?"

"Was he like that even before you got married?" Hermes asked further, as frank as ever.

"No, he was different. When I first met him in our 'omiai', I thought he was a wonderful and sincere man," the woman said.

"What's an 'omiai' [1]?" Kino asked.

"Is that the name of the restaurant where you had your first date, or something?" Hermes answered, and the woman shook her head.

"An 'omiai' is a custom in this country, where a man and a woman who hopes to get married meet for the first time. With a mediator's help, two people of similar family backgrounds and economic status meet and talk to each other to look at the possibility of a good match. If everything goes well, the marriage will push through…"

"Then that means it's possible to get married with a person you don't love?" Kino asked in surprise.

"Yes, but that's not all…. In this country, adults who don't get married are not considered as genuine grown-ups. Men should have a family to protect. Women should stay at home and take care of the household," the woman answered.

"Hmm"

"And so everyone's in a hurry to get married once they reach their late twenties. Perhaps they think that if they don't get married soon, they wouldn't be able to for the rest of their lives. They were afraid of never becoming 'genuine adults'. During those times, there are many who were encouraged to attend an 'omiai'."

"I see…. But, isn't marriage something that two people who love each other do, because they want to stay together for the rest of their lives?" Kino asked.

"Yes"

"But then, if this 'omiai' you're speaking about is for choosing a partner in order to get married…, doesn't the purpose defeat itself?"

The woman pondered for a while, and then lightly nodded.

"You can probably put it that way. But miss traveler, results-wise, the means of getting a partner doesn't have much to do with a successful married life. Things don't always turn out well even if one marries for love, and there are cases when a couple could live happily even

though their marriage was arranged through an 'omiai'. To give you an example, my parents also met each other through an 'omiai', but they were able to have a happy family. I observed this as I grew up, so I looked up to my parents as my models, and it was my dream to have the same kind of family. Miss traveler, don't you agree?"

"……"

"But in your case, you had a husband like that."

Hermes replied while Kino fell silent.

"Yes…. Before, and for a while after we got married, we were conscious of each other's needs, and I didn't realize it. However, after living together for a while, we became too familiar with each other…, and it was already too late. Once, he noticed a little dust on the floor ; all of a sudden, he got angry and hit me. At that time, I was too surprised to grasp what just happened, and he continued beating me."

"Uh-huh," Hermes interjected.

"Since then, he would become violent over the most trivial matters. Alcohol makes him even worse. He had pushed me down the stairs, pressed his cigarette on my

skin…, shut me out of the house, thinly clothed, right in the middle of winter."

"……"

"Anything else?" Hermes asked as if enjoying himself. The woman continued nonchalantly.

"He did all kinds of harsh things to me. When I told my old friend, she got angry and lectured me for a whole hour as to how something was wrong with me emotionally, and 'how a woman should behave' regardless of the violence you receive. Nothing was left of my belongings that I had before I got married. Everything was either thrown away or destroyed. I was keeping a cat until last year. However, while I was gone, that person threw it on the floor…; I had no choice but to kill it out of pity. That time, he was fined for being cruel to animals. But later on, he beat me and told me it was my fault for keeping a cat in the first place."

"……"

"Uh-huh"

"All of my books and study manuals were burned. He told me there was no need for a housewife to learn

anything else other than housekeeping. And so I bought books on cooking and housekeeping. Then he told me that I was hopeless no matter what I do, and threw away the books, which according to him, were a 'waste of money'. Ever since, I did nothing other than keeping the house. My life insurance was cancelled, and I almost have nothing for my personal expenses. He told me: ' Slaves don't need money, you just do as I tell you.'"

"Hmm. I see, I understand it very well," Hermes said with an awed tone. The woman continued.

"Even so, after behaving so violently, the next morning he would be on his knees, crying and apologizing. I would also cry and think, 'Oh, this person is really gentle deep inside,' and I would forgive him for everything. But it will happen again and again. For a while after, he wouldn't act terribly and would be kind. I would be constantly worried as to when he would be angry from my incompetence and inexperience as a wife. Perhaps, it was his weakness as a human, and I'm the only one who could help him with it — maybe it was my mission. Such thoughts crossed my mind," the woman said and laughed.

"Uhm, can't you file for divorce?" Kino asked. The woman had an expression more sorrowful than when she was being beaten.

"So you weren't aware of it, huh…. What am I saying, of course a traveler wouldn't know, I'm sorry. In this country, divorce is considered lowly, and no one approves of it. Either way, the only other means to end your marriage is to die."

"Oh, dear. Religion?"

"No. It's just a widely accepted view, I suppose. It seems they decided a long time ago that there is nothing more disgraceful than divorce. A divorced person was not able to protect his family, and hence he's an inadequate member of society, a useless person. To avoid having such people, divorce was completely banned.

"…I see," Kino muttered in a lifeless voice, and glimpsed at Hermes.

As Kino was about to say something,

"Miss traveler," the woman faced Kino with her lightly bruised face, and spoke with a forceful tone.

"I have one request of you…"

Kino looked back at the wife. She returned a silent gaze.

"What is it? Is it something that I can do?"

"Yes. Only you can do it, miss traveler. You can get me out of my trouble. I'm willing to thank you to the best of my ability. It doesn't matter to me even if you take everything of use to you in this house. My request has something to do with my husband…"

"I think I know what's coming," Hermes said.

"What is it?" Kino asked.

The woman looked back once and confirmed that there was nobody else. She made a brooding expression, and with a low but clear voice, she spoke to Kino.

"Miss traveler, with that persuader, I want you to kill my husband."

"Okay! She'll do it!" was Hermes quick and cheerful reply.

"I'm sorry, please ignore what this guy says for a while," Kino corrected.

The woman's expression did not change. She looked at Kino.

"Please. He's sleeping right now. I have the key to his bedroom."

Kino lightly shook her head and spoke. "To make things short, it's not possible. I can't do this for you."

"Oh, you won't?" Hermes asked in a light tone.

"Of course not. That's murder you know," Kino said, and Hermes replied with a somewhat repulsive tone.

"Kino, don't you remember how many people you have shot down until now? It's not like you have ' persuading powers'."

"The circumstances are different. In this case, I can be punished by this country's laws. That's what I mean by murder. I don't want to go to jail here."

"Well, whatever—. What does this wife's circumstances have to do with you, as long as you don't

die and continue to travel, Kino. Now that I think about it, it's none of your business," Hermes spoke with much sarcasm.

"Uh, uhm…" the woman shyly interjected and spoke firmly,

"You don't have to worry about that. You are not going to be charged with murder."

Kino looked as if she has just woken up in the middle of the day.

"What do you mean?"

"It's the law. In this country, even if a person from outside the country commits a crime, if he gets out of the country within the day, no crime could be charged against him. As to why…. Well, originally, the police would desperately chase after the culprit. However, they couldn't arrest them once they have escaped outside the country. To avoid people criticizing the police's incompetence, they made a law that dismisses any illegal act committed by a foreigner. That is why no matter how many people you kill here today, you can walk out of the gates tomorrow morning without any problems."

"……"

"But,"

Hermes tried to speak while Kino remained silent.

The woman continued. "I'm sure the reason for the rigorous check at the gates is this law. However, if they found out that I told you about this, I will be punished…, even so, I don't care."

Kino thought for a while, and then said, "…Can I ask you one… no, two questions?"

"Go ahead."

"If in case you could no longer stand your husband's violence, and you killed him, what will be your punishment?"

"Death penalty. A person who kills his spouse will be charged with first-degree murder and will definitely be sentenced to death. Because the violence between husband and wife is acceptable and is not a crime, I have no legal motive to kill my husband."

"…….. My other question may be a bit strange. When your husband said 'sand', what exactly does he mean?"

The woman smiled and answered, "He meant ' sandbag'. You can see for yourself the reason for that name."

"……"

"But… Kino, are you listening to me?" Hermes asked.

"I am."

The woman looked at Kino pleadingly, with almost a worshipping expression.

"I beg you…, please…"

"What will you do, Kino?"

Kino stood up. She looked at her right thigh towards Canon, which was loaded with six bullets. And then she spoke.

"Let's go back, Hermes."

"I knew it."

At the same time as Hermes' short answer, the woman 's face was filled with a look of disbelief. She kicked the chair away as she stood up and clung to Kino's leg.

"No way! I beg you! I cannot stand this sort of life anymore! You saw it yourself! You saw it, didn't you?! I was being completely battered! Miss traveler! There's no other way! Don't you see?! This is my first and final chance! I have endured until now for a chance like this! Can you hear me?!"

"We'll be… leaving," Kino slowly and gently removed the hands of the pleading woman.

She removed Hermes' stand and started to push him towards the entrance.

"I beg you…. Please…"

As Kino passed through the door, she turned to the woman who has broken down crying on the floor.

"Thank you for the cookies."

She then faced the woman whose tears was flowing down her big, gaping eyes, and finally said,

“I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be a God.”

—

Kino and Hermes went out to the street from the apartment complex.

“I don’t feel well,” Kino said shortly.

Hermes spoke, as if consoling Kino. “I understand how you feel, Kino. But this country has to solve its issues by itself. No matter what a traveler says or does, the people will still stick with their own rules. Madeline said so.”

“Who? …You mean, *meddlesome*? [2]

“Yeah, that,” Hermes said and fell silent.

"It's just as you say, Hermes. I understand that… all the more."

"I sympathize with you. Kino, you'll feel better if you eat something sweet. Ah, I just know."

Kino sighed. "I'll do that. I wonder if they have something in that café we went to in the morning…"

Kino started Hermes' engine. She put on her hat and goggles, and rode through the street.

"Kino, I thought you noticed, but…," Hermes said hesitantly while they were riding.

Kino nodded. "Yeah. I didn't say anything, but this morning, she brought out a strong alcohol and let that dish drop on purpose. …I saw it."

"That was some fine acting. I was deeply moved."

"Indeed…. There really are different types of people."

"Hey there, miss traveler."

The police officer they met that morning called out to Kino and Hermes. He was leisurely standing in front of the open street café, which was just closing shop. Kino straightened her hat with a dejected face.

Without responding, Kino approached the police officer. There was a strange expression in her face as she walked past the right side of the officer, completely ignoring him.

At that moment, Kino reached for the holster in the man's hip with her right hand, and drew out the hand persuader.

The policeman noticed immediately, but at the same time, he felt something pushing against his back, and froze. Soon he heard a voice by his ear.

"Please don't move. You don't have to raise your hands."

"M-miss traveler? W-w-w-w-what's the meaning of this?"

"Nothing. However, if I pull this trigger, something *really* bad will happen, right? But it's permissible. By the way, I'll be leaving tomorrow morning."

The police officer became speechless for a moment. And then he spoke slowly.

"…F-from who did you hear about this? Rather, who told you? Will you tell me? I-I would really appreciate it if you do, and let me r-report it to the headquarters."

Hermes poked fun at the officer. "Kino, this person sure is dedicated to his work. How wonderful. You have my respect. You should be promoted two ranks."

Kino spoke, her tone not different from usual. "It doesn't mean that someone told me. I tortured someone, and he confessed to me. He told me that if I leave tomorrow, *anything* I do here today wouldn't be considered a crime."

"……"

"Now, can I shoot?"

"…U-uhm, well…no. I have a wife that I love. I'm saying the truth. I don't want to die yet."

"…I see. Then, I'll be returning this," Kino said, and returned the persuader inside its holster.

The surprised police officer turned around and took a relieved breath as he saw that what was pointed on his back was only Kino's finger. He shook his head many times, and took in one more mouthful of air.

After a while, Kino spoke. "That's one weird law, you know."

Even though he was staring at Kino somewhat sullenly , the police officer answered with a polite tone,

"I agree. To tell you the truth, I was just thinking yesterday how that law should be revised."

"I totally approve. We might have been tempted to do something, you see."

"Over-speeding, theft, kidnap for ransom, running away without paying for food…"

Kino and Hermes happily enumerated, and the police officer took one more deep breath.

"Don't worry. We'll definitely be gone by tomorrow. We won't do anything. Also, I promise not to tell about this to anybody. …By the way, there's just one question I would like to ask."

"…What is it?"

"'Whatever happens between a married couple wouldn't be considered a crime.' Have there been any plans or moves to amend that law?" Kino asked.

"What for?" the police officer said, and made an expression as if he didn't completely understand what she meant.

"There's no need for that to be changed, is there?" the officer said clearly.

"But look here, mister policeman. Is it really acceptable to hit your partner for whatever reason?" Hermes asked immediately.

"Yes"

"You mean, it doesn't bother you?" Kino asked, and the policeman muttered a small 'yes'. And then slowly, as though he was lecturing a child in the street, he spoke to Kino and Hermes.

"If it's just that, then there should be no problems. They're a married couple, you see."

"……" "……"

"In any country, spats between married couples are unavoidable. It's impossible to get rid of that, and it's unreasonable for the police to intervene in such matters."

"Even in cases of abuse?"

The police officer gave a slight nod to Kino's question.

"Yes. Well, I suppose you can call it 'abuse' if one continues to win in a couple's fight. Even so, the police cannot interfere because that is a problem between husband and wife. No matter what, an outsider should not intervene with the problems of a couple; it wouldn't make any difference. That's called being meddlesome."

"Being meddlesome, it is" Hermes said.

"Each person has the right and duty to choose how he should live. A couple was bound by marriage to cooperate with each other forever, in times of pain and illness; sharing the joys and sorrows fate would grant them; to live under one roof and look after each other. A stranger, much less the law, has no business restricting what a couple should do. Rather, nothing in this world should restrict them.

"……"

"I've mentioned it earlier, haven't I? I'm married. That's why I understand. A couple is closest to each other and loves each other the most because they live together. Still, disputes between them are inevitable. I've said it a lot of times now, but whatever their problems may be, they have to resolve it on their own. And with that, their relationship becomes even deeper."

"Really?" Kino asked very doubtfully.

"Miss traveler, you would understand this once you get married. At that time, you would say, 'Ah, so it was really like this, eh?'"

"……"

"I see," Hermes muttered.

"Kino, how are you feeling? Are you in the mood to shoot someone?"

The police officer twitched and stiffened for a moment.

"Eh?! …Uhm"

Kino lightly tapped Canon on her right thigh, and glanced at the police officer she threatened. Then she spoke with a completely detached expression.

"Not really…"

The sigh of the police officer was heard. At the same time, Kino glowered at him.

Once again, he stiffened under Kino's stare. As she sent him sharp glares, she asked,

"I'm looking for a shop selling sweets. Is there one around here?"

Evening. Kino has already gone to bed.

In the house Kino visited in the morning, the man has woken up and went down to the dining room. He ordered his wife, who was sleeping prostrate on the table , to cook something.

The wife asked what he wanted to eat.

“Anything you make’s fine. It would be as bad as pig slop, anyway,” the man said gently.

The woman cut meat in the kitchen and made some steak. She then carried the dish to the dining room, still in the frying pan.

The woman spoke gently to the man who was seated in front of his plate.

“You know dear, there’s something I realized today.”

The man replied disinterestedly. “What is it, sandbag? ”

The woman smiled, her eyes deep red from weeping out.

"In this world, there's no such thing as a God or a Buddha. Therefore, there's no such thing as miracles. Humans should solve their problems with their own hands. Then that means…. I was mistaken. I thought… even though I don't make any effort, everything that I wish for will go my own way…. I thought that someday, a kind fairy godmother would appear out of nowhere and grant my wishes…. My father and my mother, even though they did nothing to each other, it doesn't mean their relationship was always great. Probably…. No, I'm sure it's like that."

"Hmph. You're a hopeless idiot as usual. Quit saying useless things and serve me quick. Bring some alcohol too. I have to do some exercise after my meal so stay right there, sandbag. Idiot. Trash," the man said. The woman remained standing, holding the sizzling frying pan in her hands.

"Hurry up. Or do you want me to hit you right now?"

The man spoke without looking at his wife's face. Even so, the woman remained standing dazedly, thinking about something. The man raised an irritated voice.

"Hey!"

Even so, the woman remained standing.

At last, the man kicked the chair and stood up.

Soon a scream was heard from the dining room of a house. It was a long, high-pitched scream. It resounded in the neighborhood, but nobody paid attention.

—

The next day. The morning of the third day since Kino entered the country.

When Hermes woke up, Kino has finished loading all of her luggage.

"Ah, good morning. Are we leaving already?"

Kino answered Hermes' question while wiping the lens of her goggles.

"Yeah. Even if we stayed any longer, there wouldn't be anything interesting here. …It's a dull country.""

Kino rode Hermes towards the western gate.

'What are you going to do?' Hermes asked Kino along the way.

"Let's leave things as is. There's nothing much that person can do anyway."

"Maybe so, but the same goes for you."

Upon arriving in front of the gates, Kino stopped Hermes. She cut the engine and got off. As she started to push Hermes into the gate,

"Miss traveler!"

Kino looked back. The woman she met yesterday was smiling and waving from a car slightly far away.

The woman drove the car and stopped near Kino and Hermes.

The woman quickly got out of the car and stood in front of Kino and Hermes. The bruise on her forehead was still distinctly blue in color, but she had a bright expression.

"Good morning. I came to see you off. I'm glad I caught up with you."

"Thank you…. Good morning," Kino returned the greeting with a complex expression. Still smiling, the woman tapped the car from the outside.

"Look, dear. Let's bid miss traveler farewell together. Quickly now."

The woman's husband slowly emerged from the car.

A net was covering the man's head, and the side of his head was wrapped with bandages. His left arm was in a cast hanging from his neck.

"W-what happened?" Kino asked. The man did not answer. The woman laughed, slightly embarrassed.

"Well, last night, you see…" was her only answer. And then she hit her husband's shoulder.

The man twitched and his body shook. As he stood silently, the woman from behind asked.

"Dear. Aren't you going to greet miss traveler here?"

"Ah, yeah…. Hey…, g-good morning…," the man chirped. The woman took out a stick from the car seat. It was a rolling pin used in kneading dough for a pie.

With this, the woman hit her husband's back.

"Agh!" the man shrieked and twisted his body. The woman continued and hit the helpless man's back seven times.

"What's with that tiny voice? Give her a proper greeting."

"I-I'm sorry," were the only words the man managed to say. The woman bent over and hit her husband's thigh strongly with the rolling pin. The man collapsed. He fell on his left arm and gave a shriek.

Like before, Kino just looked on without changing her expression.

Ignoring the man groveling on the ground, the woman tried to say something to Kino. At that time,

"Hey, miss traveler! Are you leaving already?" A loud voice called from afar. It belonged to the uniformed police officer Kino threatened the previous day. He approached Kino with a quick gait.

"Hello there. We meet again. It seems you're going out of the country. Did you enjoy your stay?" the policeman asked with a smile. Kino answered with a yes, and Hermes retorted,

"Very much. By the way, I see you've been tailing us since morning. You're not very good at it are you?"

The policeman narrowed his eyes for a moment. Then he replied awkwardly, "A-ah, well…, so you noticed, eh? I'm sorry, but this is part of my job…. I am dedicated to my work, after all."

"Ah, well that's funny," Hermes said, and they both laughed.

In the midst of this cheerful atmosphere,

"P-please help me!"

The man suddenly got up and shouted. He clung to the police officer's foot with his right arm.

"O-officer! You're just in time! H-help me! T-this woman is heartlessly beating me!"

The policeman looked gloomily at the man. Then he turned his face to the woman.

"Yes. He's my husband," the woman said.

"S-s-save me! I beg you! Protect me! I'm going to get killed!"

"Please calm down, mister."

The police officer slowly and gently removed the man's hand.

The woman slowly got closer to her husband's face and spoke with a gentle smile.

"Don't worry, dear. I am not going to kill you."

"Eep!" The man drew back as if trying to escape.

"I know about vital spots. You do realize that I took medicine when I was not yet married, don't you?"

"See, your wife said it herself. Mister, you have to pull yourself together," the officer said, and the man pointed at the bandages on the side of his head.

"Just look at the wounds she gave me yesterday! Last night she struck me with a sizzling frying pan without warning! After that, while I was collapsed, she recklessly hit me with a chair and broke the bones in my left arm! Look!"

"So that was the aftermath of your fight, eh? How unmanly of you!" the police officer said, making a small triumphant pose. An old man with an old woman who seemed to be his wife, snickered as they passed through.

"No way…," the man muttered. Immediately, the wife 's kick connected with his flank.

"Guh!" the man bent and pressed down on his flank. He collapsed and became quiet.

The woman bowed to the police officer several times. " I'm really sorry, officer. We're causing you trouble."

"Nope, it's okay. My job is to protect everybody's safety. Do not hesitate to approach me for the slightest concern… is what I would like to say. But the truth is there's so little crime around that I have so much free time," the police officer said as he saluted and winked.

"Well," the woman gave a slightly surprised smile.

"Help me…. Please, I'll get killed…. Officer…," a weak voice was heard.

With a disappointed look on his face, the police officer squatted down and spoke to the man groaning on his side.

"Ok, ok. Mister, police officers do not have that much free time, you know. Please stop this notion of you getting killed. You should get along with your wife. If there's any problem, you should solve it together. You are a married couple, after all."

The police officer stood up, turned to Kino and Hermes, and saluted respectfully.

"Miss traveler, I'll have to excuse myself now. I apologize for tailing you. However, I truly thank you for staying here. I'll be leaving you to the care of the gate sentry. Oh, that store's root beer float was delicious, wasn't it?"

Kino lightly bowed her head. "Yes, thank you for everything."

"You're welcome," the police officer said, and walked away.

When the police officer can no longer be seen, the woman spoke to Kino and Hermes.

"Miss traveler, I wanted to thank you. That's why I wanted to see you."

"You wanted… to thank… me?"

The woman narrowed her eyes. "Yes. Yesterday, at that time, you did the right thing. Thank you."

"……"

"Because this is my… no, our problem, we have to solve it by ourselves, right? I already quit waiting for

God. From here on, I will seize my happiness with my own hands. I will do my best to live honestly. Oh, right! I wanted to give you something as a souvenir to remind you of this country. I'll take it and return here immediately, so wait here okay?"

The woman squatted, pulled her husband's ear and brought it close to her mouth.

"Dear, I'll be back soon. Don't do anything stupid in front of miss traveler."

"……"

"Answer me!"

The man's face crumpled as his wife suddenly shouted in his ear.

"…Y-yes. I understand."

"Ah, hand me your wallet. I'll hold on to it from now on. I can't let you have excess stuff. Understand?"

"…Yes"

The moment the man said this, the woman let go of his ear. The man's head fell on the road with a blunt sound. His eyeglasses fell off.

The woman took out a wallet from the man's breast pocket. She lightly sauntered to a nearby store and went inside.

With the same expressionless face, Kino looked on as the man slowly raised himself up.

The man sat up. Blood seeped out of the bandages from his head. He looked up at Kino with a pleading, almost worshipping expression.

"M-miss traveler…. I-I have one request," the man spoke feebly.

"What is it?"

"C-can you kill *that*?"

"What do you mean by 'that'?"

Kino asked with an extremely normal tone. The man spoke wildly while his head trembled.

"My wife! I-It's only in this country… where there's a law that if you're a traveler, anything you do won't be held against you as long as you leave immediately. B-but, if they found out that I told this to you, I will be punished…, even so, I don't care! S-so please, with that persuader, shoot my wife to death! I'll do anything to thank you!"

"But… what are you going to do, Kino?"

"I refuse."

The man looked as if he was about to cry at Kino's reply. Soon, he really did burst into tears.

While hanging his head and sobbing bitterly, the man muttered.

"…W-why do I have to suffer like this…? Why…? I don't understand at all. Have I done anything to her for her to treat me like this? Is there any reason why my wife would suddenly become violent and attack her husband like this?"

"I don't know. I'm single, so I don't understand," Kino said.

'Ah,' the man muttered softly. He sniffled several times.

"…Until now, I did a fine job supporting my family. I did all that I can to do what was expected of a husband. I dismissed socializing with others, came home from work early…, set aside some time for conversation with her, stayed with her during holidays. I even had the same hobbies as her."

"……" "……"

"Of course, she was pretty demanding…, but I tried my best to do everything for her, even if I had to make sacrifices… because I was aiming for a harmonious married life. And so…, I thought she would be very happy… Why, why did it turn out like this…? There's something utterly wrong with her since yesterday. Maybe I should have her checked in the hospital even if she's against it? Ah…"

"Until yesterday, was there anything your wife should be angry about?" Kino asked.

"I don't know…. I couldn't think of anything…"

"Like punching her all of a sudden or something?"

The man slightly raised his head to Hermes' question. He became slightly garrulous.

"Well that's…, whenever my wife makes a mistake, I would hit her, but since she's a woman, I go easy on her. If that's——"

The man's upper body suddenly collapsed.

"Aagh!"

His eyeglasses flew away. The man's face was scraped on the road. The woman who just came back pitilessly kicked away the man's right arm.

The woman ignored her husband and handed a tiny paper bag to Kino.

"Here. A souvenir from this country. Open it."

Kino looked inside. Carved on a tiny iron plate was a pair of water birds that resembled wild ducks nestled close together. She showed it to Hermes.

"It's a charm. I thought a big one would be a bother to take with you."

“Thank you very much. What kind of charm is this?” Kino asked, and the woman answered with a smile.

“It’s for a happy marriage. These are called ‘ Mandarins’. It is said that these birds live their whole life with the same partner. A long time ago, married couples with good relationships were called ‘Mandarin couples’ [3]. Someday, somewhere, I wish that you would find a wonderful partner, miss traveler.”

“……. Thank you… very much.”

With an indescribable expression on her face, Kino thanked the woman. And then, she pushed Hermes into the gates. She looked back once, and saw the woman striking the man several times.

“Tadah! Look here please!”

The sentry cheerfully greeted and showed a panel to Kino across the ticket window of the guard post. Over there were photos of several men with general profiles written underneath.

"What… is this?" Kino asked.

"Listen well! This is something originally developed in our country. A historical couple compatibility diagnostic method we call the *'Perfect Matching Method'*. After our calculations, we produced a list of men which would be perfect husband-material for Miss Kino!"

"What?"

"Let me see! Let me see!" Hermes said energetically, and the sentry changed the angle a little for Hermes to see.

"When you entered the country, you answered a questionnaire, didn't you? With that, we determined Miss Kino's hereditary disposition, and judged based on different possibilities. On top of that, we've chosen men from our country who are perfectly compatible with Miss Kino's values, way of living, thinking, attributes, and feelings!"

"What for?"

The guard grinned. "It's only in this country. If you agree to have an interview with these men, you will be given permission to stay in our country for one month. And if you decide to marry one of them, we will grant you citizenship unconditionally."

"……" "That's amazing!"

Kino kept silent while Hermes gleefully exclaimed.

"Isn't it? Wow, you are so lucky Miss Kino. You dropped in during our campaign period, purely by chance. This is such a great opportunity, don't you think? I doubt you'll have a chance like this elsewhere. There are few chances for you to get to know someone wonderful during your travels, right?"

"True, true! That's spot on. Kino seldom meets anyone. On rare occasions, they would either be shot to death, or would escape frazzled all over. It's really thrilling to watch from below, you know." Hermes was truly enjoying this. The sentry continued.

"How about it Miss Kino? According to our data, 67% of single men and 82% of single women think that marriage will make them happy. However, only 43% of men and 29% of women think that they will meet someone even if they don't do anything. Maybe you have to take one more look at your life, and try it out for the time being? We have data for thousands of men, and among these, we can send you about fifty files to peruse every week. We also sponsor wonderful get-together parties twice a week. Moreover, the government runs this system, so the national assembly hall can be used as the reception hall! There is live music from the national orchestra, and from time to time, the state leader even comes to give a speech!"

"……"

"What do you think? There was a scholar who said that humans are animals who live to support each other. There was also a poet who left the words, 'Marriage is the least and last form of human interaction.' He also said this: 'Marriage is half pain and twice the pleasure.'"

"……"

"Don't you think people who are not married and talk about life are mistaken? Marriage is the goal of a human's existence, and marriage is just the beginning of a person's life. Everything that you do in your life before that is just in preparation for marriage. It's just a *rehearsal*, you know?"

"……"

"Miss Kino, you're still young, but if you take your time, you will be an old maid in no time! So now! Sign this contract immediately and find a wonderful partner in our country!"

Kino poked her finger on the man's head, who slowly raised his face. And then,

"Don't you know? Anything I do here wouldn't be considered a crime," she threatened in a whisper.

"Have a nice trip—!" The guard gave her a refreshing smile and said this energetically. Then he closed the guard post's shutters in an instant.

"……"

While shaking her head several times, she climbed on Hermes and started the engine. She strapped her goggles on.

"Let's go, Hermes."

"Is it okay if you don't get married?" Hermes teased.

"Traveling is much safer," Kino answered.

"I guess so."

While riding away, Kino looked back at the towering walls and muttered,

"I wish you happiness."

“Tradition” —Tricksters—[4]

Chapter Four

"Tradition"

— Tricksters —

Kino and Hermes arrived in a small country.

At the bottom of a mountain covered with a dense forest was the expanse of a town with a modest castle at its center. One can go full-circle around the ivy-covered walls in one afternoon walk.

Kino knocked on the gates and asked the gatekeeper for permission to enter the country.

The guard, who was wearing a helmet which seemed like a traditional costume, beamed upon learning that it was Kino and Hermes’ first time to visit this country.

The guard talked to someone on the phone. From within the gates, the clanging of bells was heard.

“I alerted the whole country because it is very rare for us to have guests. It’s so that they can prepare for the welcoming party,” the guard said with a smile.

Soon the gate opened, and Kino pushed Hermes inside . Upon passing through the gates, a great number of the citizens came to receive them.

“……” “……”

And both Kino and Hermes fell silent.

The citizens were wearing 'ears' on their heads. A pair of ears was sticking out of their hair, symmetrically positioned on both sides. The neatly triangular-shaped ears were exactly like a cat's.

"Welcome! Traveler and motorrad, welcome to our country!"

A representative of the citizens said this, and shook hands with Kino. It was a man in the prime of his life who seemed to be the leader. Above his smiling face and firmly hardened hair, dark brown 'cat ears' were attached.

—

Kino and Hermes introduced themselves, and the man with the dark brown cat ears, who was the country's ruler, guided them to the castle which was being used as his office.

As soon as a female secretary with purple cat ears left after serving tea, the man gave a simple explanation about the country.

A long, long time ago, a town was built around a castle which a certain royal family used as a summer vacation house. After that royal family perished, the citizens continued to thrive on the land.

The population was small but they lived in utter peace. And—— it was a tradition from those times for the citizens to wear cat ears on their heads.

"The sweet nature of a person is drawn out by using these. No matter how furiously angry someone is, once we flick these ears, his anger would dissipate as if by magic, and a smile would cross his face. People long ago must have thought of this as a means of making harmonious human relations. It's a wonderful tradition," the man said warmly while shaking his ears.

With very few and rare exceptions, such as changing one's hairstyle or replacing them as one grows older, the citizens were always required to wear the cat ears on their heads.

There was an ancient-looking oil painting decorating the wall, featuring a gracefully smiling naked woman wearing cat ears.

The man asked, "Miss Kino, as you are our long-awaited guest, why don't you try and experience our country's tradition?"

"What do you mean?" Kino replied.

The man took out a box the size of a dictionary from under the table. He opened it and showed its contents to Kino. Inside was a set of chic black ears.

"I'll lend these to you, Miss Kino. We thought you'd feel ill at ease if everyone except for you were wearing cat ears. Won't you wear them while you're here? It has the same color as your hair, Miss Kino. I'm sure they would suit you well. Of course, you are not obliged to, but…"

—

"You should have agreed to wear the ears if it's just for today. That man yesterday really looked dejected you know," said Hermes.

It was early in the afternoon of the second day. Kino was pushing along Hermes as they slowly toured the narrow townscape. All of their luggage was left in the room which they received for free. But for the time being, Kino was holding the cat ears she was given the previous day.

Children waved their hands when they saw Kino and Hermes. All of them were wearing cat ears of various colors. The ears swayed cutely as they shook their heads.

"Aren't you going to wear the ears, miss traveler?" they asked innocently.

In the shop where they had their meal and tea,

"Oh my—, you have a pretty face. But everyone becomes prettier when they have the ears on, you know," a nice-figured waitress wearing wide ears said rather regretfully.

When they visited the castle, a small child pointed his finger.

"Mommy. That person is not wearing ears. She's so weird—"

The mother spoke to the child. 'That person is a traveler. She was born in a different country, so she is a bit different from us. She doesn't have to wear ears,' she gently scolded.

Along the road, a middle-aged woman spoke to Kino. ' If you wear the cat ears, I'm sure you will be popular with boys,' she said.

"For some reason, the ears suit anyone, and the charm of the person wearing them changes. When I was young, there was a research saying that in order for you to look your best, you should look at the mirror everyday," and she furtively informed her to try this secret.

—

That night.

They opened the welcoming festival for the traveler. Soon they announced the start of the traditional cat-ear dance for the citizens. The people made a circle, bent their hands like cat paws, and hopped with the rhythmical music.

Kino who was looking on comfortably, was also invited to wear ears and to participate in the dance.

"People often say that I don't have any talent for dancing. I would just end up stepping on everybody's feet," Kino politely refused. And then she added,

"Even so, it's a wonderful dance. I was deeply moved. I'm glad I came here."

—

The next morning.

Kino and Hermes set off after the cat-eared citizens bid them farewell.

When the traveler was already out of sight, the leader removed the dark brown cat ears from his head with a somewhat regretful look on his face. The other citizens removed their own cat ears as well while the crowd dissolved.

The female secretary beside the man came and took his ears and removed her own. She put them in a basket with the words 'Collection Box' written on it.

The woman spoke to the man who still looked disappointed. "It's no good, huh? She didn't join in."

"Yeah, it's no good…. Ring the bell to announce that it' s over."

"I've arranged for it."

"With this, we already have 549 wins and 233 losses. In my tenure, we had 3 wins and 8 losses…. The travelers we had for several years must have circulated rumors about this country to several others."

"Indeed."

"Well, that's that. Now, what do we do next time? We should decide quickly, or else we won't be able to prepare and practice. We have to change the painting too ——"

A motorrad was running along a road in the forest.

"Cat ears…, I didn't see that coming. Everyone was cute to some extent. I cannot count the number of times I had to stop myself from laughing, you know. That dance was really amusing too," Kino said with a smile.

"It would be amusing if you wore them too, Kino. I'm sure they would suit you very well."

"Well, whatever. Riding with lies is something I'm not good at, after all."

And then, with an extremely serious tone,

"They did not show the slightest bit of a character's element of surprise, even if it's for the spirit of service, don't you think Kino?"

"What's that about…? But they sure don't run out of ideas. I only heard this but…, it was said that they also wore turtle shells on their backs, attached lion tails on their bottoms, imitated how crows walk, used an intense dance as a greeting, cry suddenly while greeting, ate while they sang…. What will they do next?"

"Decorate their heads with crow feathers, enter a room hopping with their right leg, eat while their left hand is pointing at the sky, put on white make-up around their eyes, greet with thumbs up and say 'Yay!', maybe?"

"Yeah, that's it. I too, won't give any spoilers to the travelers we meet. Everyone will be happy if they get to drag someone to their tradition."

"Jeez…, there's one over here too," [5] Hermes said with an upset expression to the very relaxed Kino.

—

“——Now that I think about it, that traveler which came half a year ago was a nice one,” the leader suddenly muttered in his office.

“Hmm? Oh yeah. That time, it was the ‘putting an apple on your head’ tradition. Really, he did it right away. He also joined in on the apple dance,” the secretary replied, and the man, while looking at the ceiling,

“There were no others who were as polite and as earnest. He even said, ‘This tradition is great’. He must have been raised very well…. Ah, I wish more people like that would come,” he said with profound emotion.

The secretary slightly smiled as she remembered that time.

And spoke.

“Indeed, it was a guy wearing a green sweater who came riding a buggy, wasn’t it?”

“A Land Without the Need for Work” —Workable—[6]

Chapter Five

"A Land Without the Need for Work"

— Workable —

"What a nice-looking country."

A traveler who has finished passing through the gate said this as she looked at the scenery.

The traveler was around mid-teens. She had short black hair, and was wearing a long brown coat.

"You bet. It has been quite some time since we arrived in a modern and organized country. The immigration inspection was fully automated too," answered a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) being pushed along by the traveler. The motorrad was loaded with traveling luggage on top and on both sides of its rear wheel.

The perfect townscape spread before the traveler and the motorrad. A number of wide, orderly roads were lined up. Here and there were parks abundant with greenery. The buildings lined up at the center of the country where beautifully designed, both in outward appearance and in arrangement.

The evening sun shined on this image of functionality and beauty merged into one.

"Now, what are we going to do, Kino?" the motorrad asked. The traveler called Kino answered,

"For today, let's look for a place to stay the night. We'll take a walk tomorrow."

"Roger"

As the motorrad said this, a car stopped right in front of Kino and Hermes. Nobody was aboard the loading platform of the car.

'Please hop aboard, I will accompany you to your place of destination,' a machine in the vehicle informed them.

Kino asked for the price, and a reply came, telling them that they need not pay for anything.

"What do we do, Hermes? Is it okay with you to ride this thing?"

"I don't mind. It's probably faster than looking for a hotel by ourselves."

"Okay."

As Kino proceeded to push Hermes into the loading platform, a crane automatically extended for Hermes to board. Afterwards, a belt and wheel stopper came out and fixed him in place.

"How nifty," Hermes said admiringly.

Kino climbed up and sat down. As expected, a belt automatically fastened itself on her, and the car set off.

The other cars running on the wide road were evenly spaced from each other. The cars were picking up passengers. In the park, they saw children who were apparently finished playing crowding up in the cars.

And then the car went towards the center of the country which was lined up with buildings.

They arrived in a splendid hotel. A machine by the entrance welcomed them. They were not charged a single cent.

Kino and Hermes were ushered into a tiny car, and guided to a splendid room while they were in their seats.

After the machine finished its duty as a hotel boy, it expressed thanks and left the room.

"What a relaxed country," Kino said while hanging her coat on a chair. She was wearing a black coat underneath.

A high-caliber hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) was suspended from her right thigh. Another automatic-type was attached behind her waist.

"It's nice not to have to do anything, huh?" said Hermes. Kino spoke While taking down the luggage.

"A while ago, I heard this rumor among travelers. The machines here were so developed that there was almost nothing else for humans to do. It seems that the citizens here don't have to work."

"Ohh. Then, what do the people of this country do everyday? Sing or dance, perhaps?"

To Hermes' question, Kino only tilted her head and said that she had no idea.

"They might be doing something that we haven't encountered before. Let's go and look for it tomorrow. It will be fun."

"If you like what you see, will you immigrate?" Hermes asked.

—

The next day. Kino woke up at dawn.

As usual, Kino performed her exercises as well as training and maintenance of her 0persuaders. She ate her breakfast after taking a shower and tapped Hermes awake a bit earlier than usual. Hermes complained that it was too early.

In front of the hotel, Kino was about to turn Hermes' engine on, when an empty car came again.

"*Really*, we don't have to do anything at all, eh? If I keep on taking it easy, my engine will get rusty," Hermes spat in a tone which was either that of admiration or complaint.

When the car asked for their destination, Kino replied that she wanted to go to a place where people gathered. The machine told her that she has to be more specific.

Kino thought for a bit, and spoke. "A place where many of the citizens of this country go to in the morning, perhaps."

'Roger. I'll take you to the office block in the central district,' the car said and set off.

The car went through the wide road. As they approached the beautiful towering building, the number of cars running in the street increased. Upon closer inspection, men and women wearing neat suits with neckties were riding on the cars. None of them looked too cheerful.

Eventually, the cars stopped and lined up in a queue in front of the building. Kino and Hermes got off. In the vicinity, other people were also getting off from their cars . They disappeared into the building with quick strides. The empty cars left and the people rode in different cars.

"……"

Kino gazed at this scenery for a while.

“What do you think?” she asked Hermes.

“People heading for work. No matter what country it is, the usual morning scenery involves people going to work,” Hermes answered honestly.

“It sure looks that way…,” Kino said uncertainly.

“Wasn’t this supposed to be a country where people don’t need to work?”

“That was supposed to be the case…”

Kino looked around and called out to a middle-aged man who got out of a car which happened to stop nearby . However,

“I’m in a hurry,” the man bluntly declared, and disappeared into the building.

“He sure is busy,” Hermes said.

Kino tried to get into the building to ask somebody. However, a machine by the entrance rejected them politely, and told them that unauthorized people are not allowed to enter.

Eventually, there were no more people who were ' going to work'.

Only Kino and Hermes were left standing in the road in front of the office block.

"What now?" Hermes asked.

Kino thought for a while, and when she was about to say something, a car stopped nearby. The door opened, and a young man came out in a flurry.

The man tried to enter the building but was not allowed. He dropped his shoulders and walked, tottering along the sidewalk.

"Perfect. Let's ask that guy," Kino said.

—

“I see, so you’re a traveler, eh?” the young man said in a lifeless tone. He was wearing a business suit and necktie, and was around his early twenties.

Kino, Hermes and the man were in a park in one corner of the office block. They were sitting on a bench in front of a fountain. There was nobody around. When Kino tried to talk with him, he invited them out to walk a small distance to this place, where they could settle down and chat.

The man summoned a machine going around the area and ordered drinks. ‘This is our currency,’ he said, and passed a card through the machine. Tea in a paper cup came out. Kino received her share for free.

“You want to know what we’re doing in that building? ” the man said after downing half of his tea.

“Yes”

“We ‘work’ there. Everyday,” the man said.

“Work?”

“Yeah. I overslept and came in late so I couldn’t enter the company building. What a mistake! I was careless…,” the man said and then continued with a cheerful tone.

“Well, it’s too late to do anything about it. From now on, I’ll make sure not to do the same mistake ever again.”

“But wasn’t this country supposed to have machines that do everything so humans don’t have to work anymore?” Hermes asked. ‘That’s right,’ the man said simply, and continued.

“We don’t have to do any labor, but we have to [work].’”[7]

“?” “?”

The man continued upon seeing Kino’s puzzled face.

“Oh, right——. Hmm, I think the [work] I’m referring to must be different from your idea of work.”

Kino asked, "In other words, the [work] you're talking about does not involve laboring or doing something for others, making something, selling something, or being of service to people?"

"That's right. What you said just now is an old definition in this country, miss traveler. We don't have to do that sort of stuff anymore because the machines do everything already. Well, with the exception of some people who have special abilities like painting and music , most of the people like me have to [work] as company employees."

Kino nodded. "I see. I understand up to that part. Then, what is this [work] you and everybody else do everyday? And that said, why do you do it?"

The man made a few small nods while listening to the question. And then he answered.

"First, as to why, we have to earn money. It is something it has in common with the old definition. In this country, the citizens are guaranteed minimal living necessities, so money is not really necessary. We can live in a government-owned facility where food and clothing are provided until we die. But no one wanted to live a

life like that of a prisoner. If we have money, we can live in a nice place, buy nice things, and eat delicious food. The more we [work], the more money we get. After all, it is necessary to earn money in order to live."

"Uh-huh" "I see."

"And, as to what we're doing."

"Yes"

"We receive stress."

"Eh?" Kino replied.

"We receive stress. To undergo physical, and more importantly, mental stimuli which are by no means pleasurable —— that is this country's definition of [work]."

The man put his empty cup beside the bench, and it was immediately picked up by a cleaning machine. The man continued.

"As to what we do exactly, I'll give you an example of my [work] assignment. Since almost all citizens in this country are company employees, I believe it is the same

for everybody. ——First, we dress up in neat clothes and go to office. We go to the company first thing in the morning and listen to the company president's long and winding speech during the morning assembly. The speech is just made up of sentences with no particular meaning, but in any case, standing in attention and listening to it is really a pain. You could say that the way it was being delivered is a pain in itself. After that, I will be severely scolded by my boss. The reason for the reprimand will be randomly decided on by a machine. Yesterday, I was scolded for having a good time during the weekends. After that, there are various stuff…. Correcting errors in documents; making calculations without any real meaning; earnestly requesting something from a person whose [work] is to refuse people; understanding the bad results of our personality assessment; exchanging mutual insults with a co-worker regarding choice of clothes; bowing in shame to a person disguised as a customer…"

"……" "……"

"…Fetching unnecessary stuff from storehouses and taking a long time on purpose; putting them back in place and taking a long time again; and then coming back and being shouted at by your boss with words like '

you idiot', 'imbecile', 'moron', 'trash,' and so on; walking and visiting from house to house with no real purpose; riding in a bus meant for ten but contains twenty people to experience the unpleasant feeling of crowding together; playing a sport you're bad at with your boss, and praising him even though he's just as bad as you are; insulting female employees to the verge of sexual harassment; consuming bitter tea; photocopying once a day. In any case, there are various things. ——The salary you will receive will vary depending on the amount of stress you experience. The intensity of [work] and the salary of a full-time employee which toils from morning to night during weekdays is different from that of a part-timer which works only half the day. Of course, jobs will be decided based on a person's age and experience. Experienced people receive more stress, and their tasks revolve around more important [work]. As for me, I'm still a freshman employee, so the way I'm treated is no big deal. I want to become more experienced so that I can earn more soon."

Kino asked the man, "Uhm, since when did this [work] system started?"

"As to when it started…, it was there long before I was born. I don't really know when."

"Doesn't the condition of your bodies diminish with this kind of [work]?"

"Of course, there's that factor. Because it's still stress one way or the other, once it accumulates, there's nothing we can do about it. There are people who were hospitalized due to ulcers, extreme hair loss, insomnia, hallucination, ruined skin, overeating, and so on. Some commit murder or suicide. But most of the people don't have problems, I think. Our free time is used cleverly, in letting our feelings out. During weekdays, upon getting home from [work], we drink with our buddies. No one ever complains, and everyone steadily performs their tasks everyday."

"Why stress out yourselves just to earn money, to begin with?" Hermes asked.

The man shrugged, "Who knows? I don't really know who or when someone came up with it but," and continued,

"I think it's such a wonderful idea."

"Really?"

"Yup. Humans can't live in comfort all their lives. If humans don't experience some form of hardship each day, they will become lazy and useless. It is important to have something to do in one's life. In old times, that is equivalent to working everyday in order to live, but now it is [work]. I feel that people long ago created this system because they understand this. If machines do everything for us, humans will live only a life of lethargy, and someday this country will be in ruins. The citizens are given their everyday stress, and they are given money for their efforts. It's killing two birds with one stone."

"Are you pleased with your life in this country? Don't you find this [work] unpleasant?"

"Yes, I like it. The [work] is unpleasant at times. But, as a social responsibility, receiving stress precisely each day is a very good thing to fulfill our duties as adults. Last year, I was still a minor, relaxing and doing stupid things , thinking 'Ah, starting next year, I too will [work] everyday…, wear a suit and necktie each morning and go to [work]…' It felt like something I don't want to do. But now, everyday I get to look dignified, or rather pressured, but have this feeling of contentment at the

same time. When I started, it felt as if I'm already a full-grown man. Now that I think about it, I couldn't forget the smile on my parents' faces when I received my first salary. My father told me, 'With this, you are now also a fine adult. It was worthwhile bringing you up.' That time I was really so happy…"

"Uh-huh," Hermes interjected.

"There's this saying that I really like. 'Weariness from [work] is not the same as that from play. A night after [work] is more refreshing than a night after play.' ——In my life, I wish to have much more nights after [work] than nights after play. Than getting tired everyday from play, I'd rather experience pleasant fatigue everyday from [work]. That way, I get to truly enjoy my precious leisure time. Someday, I'll get older and eventually have a family of my own. When that time comes, I will [work] with my whole energy not just for my own but for my beloved family as well. Once my family greets me with a smile, each day's weariness will be blown away all at once. And I'll serve until retirement age. Until that time, I will do what I can above my limits. From the lowest, I'll be a department head; if I can I'll aim to be a manager, and if I feel like it, maybe I can be the company president too. That is my life's dream. This country is a really good

place because you can achieve your dreams with your own efforts — because it gives each citizen a goal, something to live for."

The man looked up at the blue sky, and said this with a fresh smile. He faced Kino.

"Miss traveler, if in case, you are thinking of immigration, this country is a good choice. I am recommending it to you. There is [work] for everyone. As a middle-class citizen, your lifestyle will depend on your efforts. Immigrants are always welcome. ——Think about it."

"Yes. Thank you very much," Kino said with a smile.

"Do you have something else you would like to ask?"

Kino thought for a while.

"Just one thing. It has nothing to do with the [work] we were talking about earlier. Yesterday, my hotel and meal expenses were free, but I'm about to leave the country. When I go shopping, how will I pay for stuff that I need for traveling?"

"Ah—, I wonder…. Indeed, if it's only a few days, guests are not charged anything. Not many stay for too long. Since you do not have a card, it will be hard to trade in this country's marketplace. If you go and ask the machine in a shop, I think it will be able to tell you more details."

"I see. Thank you very much. It's only because I have a few things that I need."

"I see. Well, it's about time for me to go home. I'll have to try my best again tomorrow. For today, I guess I'll just read a self-improvement book in my room. Ah, if you are going to buy things, the shopping center at the center of the country would be good."

Kino thanked him once more, and the man left.

—

In the bench, Kino requested one more cup of tea. She drank the tea leisurely while looking at the scenery of the towering building and the empty park.

"What are we going to do after this, Kino? Are we going around the country?" Hermes asked. While gazing straight ahead, Kino answered.

"Hermes, I… heard something very good…"

"Huh?"

"That person before. I heard something very good from him. I heard something valuable from his story. I feel like I just realized what I should do from now on…"

Surprised with Kino's serious face and tone, Hermes asked.

"Huh? Wait, what are you planning to do? …Don't tell me you like to live in this country, Kino."

Kino looked at Hermes, and spoke as if he just said something ridiculous.

“That’s not it,” and then she continued,

“We should go shopping.”

“Huh?”

“Well, it’s all free right? Ammunition, food, fuel, clothes… other things that can be exchanged for high value in other countries. This is a rare chance. Let’s use today and tomorrow to grab everything we can before we leave.”

“……”

Kino stood up. And then she politely handed the empty paper cup to the cleaning machine.

“Let’s go, Hermes. Humans should relax whenever they can. Today is certainly the time for that,” Kino said energetically when she came back.

“Like teacher, like student.” [8]

Hermes whispered with deep emotion.

“Hmm? Did you say something?” Kino asked as she pushed Hermes along.

Hermes answered with his usual tone.

“Nothing.”

“A Land Divided” —World Divided—

Chapter Six

"A Land Divided"

— World Divided —

The road was divided into two.

One climbs up a hill, continuing towards a forested highland in the north.

One goes down south, extending towards the ocean which can be seen as blue from a distance.

“Now, Kino. Which way do we go?” said a stationary motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). The motorrad’s rear wheel was packed on top and on both sides with traveling luggage.

Standing beside him, the human called Kino muttered, “Now that you mention it…”

She was around mid-teens in age, had short black hair and an intrepid expression on her face. Goggles were dangling from her neck, and she was holding a brown coat in her hands.

She was wearing a black jacket with a wide belt fastened on her waist. Suspended on her right thigh was a holster for a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol), and another automatic-type was attached behind her waist.

Kino turned and looked behind her. There was the towering interior of the walls and the now closed gates.

The wall disappears into an endless stretch of mountains to the north, and likewise fades into the continuously extending downward slope to the south. The enclosing walls cannot be seen. One would wonder whether the place was really inside a country or not.

"Phew…. This is such a big country. I want a map," Kino said while rolling her coat.

"For the meantime, why don't we go towards the sea, Hermes? I have no reason in particular, but there might be someone over there."

Kino asked, and the motorrad called Hermes replied, " That's fine with me."

Kino tied the coat to the carrier and started Hermes' engine. She wore her hat, strapped her goggles on and slowly went down the road heading to the sea.

After some time descending down the hill, the coastline and the town came into view at the tip of the slope.

A hovee (Note: ‘Hover vehicle’. A floating vehicle) [9] came flying from below. Several men were aboard its deck. It made a sudden steep turn, lowered its altitude, and moved side by side with Kino and Hermes.

“Are you a traveler?” A man called out with a loud voice from the platform. Kino nodded, and the man happily made an exaggerated gesture, pointing towards the city at the end of the road.

“Welcome! Please follow the road to reach our place over there!”

Kino nodded several times and raised her left thumb. The men on the hovee waved their hands, then the hovee accelerated and went ahead.

Kino and Hermes entered the coastal town. On the left side, there was a dike made to protect against the waves on the beach, and the round expanse of the sparkling blue ocean. The white houses made of stone were lined up along the slope facing the ocean. Several people who caught sight of Kino and Hermes waved their hands from their windows.

The people gathered in a square by the harbor. Kino stopped Hermes as she was invited to come in.

“Welcome, rare traveler!” An old man who seemed to be the chief greeted Kino.

“Hello. I am Kino, and this here is my partner, Hermes .” Kino removed her hat and greeted back. Hermes also said ‘hello’.

The old man introduced himself as the chief. He invited Kino to a roofed bench where they could sit together. She parked Hermes on his stand beside her.

Everyone observed as the chief welcomed the rare visitor to the town and offered her lodgings and meals for free. Kino thanked him.

‘There’s something I would like to ask,’ Kino told him, and she proceeded to ask as to why there was no map in the fully automatic gates, and the reason why the road was divided.

The chief’s expression darkened a little.

"The truth is…, right now this country is divided into two: the coastal part and the highlands to the north."

"Why is that?" Hermes asked.

"Well…, differences in opinion I suppose. The country is so wide, and we almost broke off. But the truth is that we just can't get in friendly terms with each other. Oh, it' s so embarrassing."

And then the chief suddenly asked Kino, "By the way, are you picky with food?"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking if there's a particular food or cuisine Miss Kino would never eat?"

Kino thought for a while, and then she shook her head and said no.

"Or one that your body rejects?"

"Nothing in particular."

The chief grinned, “That’s great. It’s our custom to prepare unusual and luxurious dishes, but…”

As if on cue, the people surrounded Kino and made inviting gestures. Everyone had excited eyes, as if in anticipation of something. The chief continued.

“Whenever there is something for us to celebrate, it is our custom to make extravagant meals together with everyone. For instance, to have a rare visitor like you, Miss Kino, is such an exciting event——”

Kino understood the intention of the people, and nodded.

“——We thank you for preparing us a welcoming celebration. Everyone,”

Upon hearing this, the eyes of the surrounding people glittered.

“I see,” the chief said with a comfortable and solemn expression.

Kino stood up. She looked around the people surrounding her, and faced the chief.

"Well, I think it's worth a try."

Everybody raised a cheer.

Kino and Hermes were guided into a room with a good view of the sea.

They came to the room that the chief used after taking down the luggage off Hermes. They were invited to a hunting tour. The hovee will go out to sea, and while in an honorary seat, they will be entertained with a view of large prey.

Kino thought it was interesting and readily agreed, and asked Hermes what to do.

"We're free anyway," Hermes said. Kino pushed Hermes along and went out of the room.

Several hovees were lined up on the harbor. Kino went aboard a hovee with Hermes.

The group of hovees floated lowly, and soared towards the clear and calm sea. The hovee Kino and Hermes were riding followed into the air.

“Anyhow, the prey will be large. It will be an exciting hunt,” the young man who was hired to be their guide said happily.

They looked down and saw the men taking out something from the crates on the deck. Those were long and narrow tubes the length of a child. They gripped the tubes and placed them on their padded shoulders. At one end, there was a thick, cone-like protrusion attached.

“Those are tools which fire off gunpowder from the explosive-filled tips. They were called ‘rockets’ or something. It seems that they were used in wars a long, long time ago to destroy vehicles and hard objects.”

“Those will be used in the hunt?” Kino asked.

“Yes, that’s right. Those are important for catching the prey,” the guide answered with a laugh. At that moment, a voice came from the driver’s seat.

"There it is! To the left!" He pointed to the sea surface, where a fountain of water sprayed up.

The hovees scattered and approached, surrounding the fountain of water. The hovee where Kino and Hermes was riding on slightly advanced. A person leaned over from the deck and waved a flag to indicate directions.

A big black shadow appeared and stirred under the sea surface directly below the hovee Kino was riding.

It was an enormous creature. It was thick and streamlined. Its huge tail fin quietly went up and down, slowly propelling it forward. From tip to tail, it was several times the length of a hovee.

"It's big," Kino murmured.

"It's a whale. It is the largest creature in the oceans. Is this your first time seeing one?"

"Yes. I only read about it in books. Even so, it's really big."

"So in a place like this, you can do some 'whale sightseeing', eh?" Hermes said.

"Ah, no no. The show is just getting started. ——We will hunt *that*."

The hovees approached it on both sides and dropped something on the sides of the whale. They dropped several pieces of cylinders the size of small packets one at a time.

The packets exploded underwater. Water columns rose in succession on both sides of the whale. The muffled explosions echoed.

The huge form of the whale twisted. As if in a rampage, its tail struck the sea surface loudly, and lifted its head high.

At that moment, rockets were launched from the hovee which passed right above it.

Whoosh—!

The rockets left a white trail of smoke, and hit the head of the whale as it emerged from the water.

Its head exploded.

Mixed flesh and blood scattered and fell loudly onto the water surface.

In a moment, the whale’s huge form squirmed, making waves on the surface. Then it stopped moving. It stopped living. The deep red seawater began to engulf its body.

“Great—!”

The guide and everyone on board the hovees raised a cheer.

A number of people holding ropes jumped off. They tied the whale’s tail to several hovees.

They dragged it to shore while the bulky corpse left a trail of blood.

The headless whale was raised on the slope for lowering ships beside the square. Cheers rose from the people who were preparing the venue.

They began to take apart the body of the whale. They hauled a gigantic saw using a hovee. Soon, the harbor was stained dark with the spilled blood.

It was carved into big blocks and the blocks were carried by truck to the square. Then several people cut them to smaller pieces.

After they finished cutting the meat, it was divided into three portions. The chief explained to Kino.

“The ones placed beside the tent are for today’s feast. Those in the trucks will be stored for future use. And then,”

The chief pointed to the meat, bones and pieces of entrails piled high on top of a big sheet. Upon closer inspection, those were also parts meant for consumption.

“Those are *everybody else’s* share.”

“Who do you mean by ‘everybody else’?” Kino asked.

“Our comrades, but they’re not here right now. I’ll introduce them later,” said the chief, grinning.

“——Now, everyone let’s eat.”

With the chief’s introduction, the people filled the square and started the banquet.

A plate was passed to Kino who was sitting nearby. Young women and rough-looking men in aprons were busy working. The chief told her that this country had good dishes, and above all, attractive people.

"Now, please have some too, Miss Kino," the chief urged her.

A big shrimp was placed in one big platter. Its torso was gaping open, and sliced raw flesh was placed inside. The head and feet of the dying shrimp moved and twitched from time to time, as if recalling something.

Placed in another plate was a fish with only its head, backbone, and tail fin, with its beaten and minced body placed beside. Its mouth and gills, in which water will never pass again, opened and closed.

Live shrimp and shellfish were placed on top of a charcoal oven. These writhed for a while, before they emitted bubbles and died.

Steaks were carried in — it was the meat of the whale earlier. It seemed delicious as it was not too burnt, but blood accumulated on the dish.

"……"

Kino gazed at these for a while.

—

“Good grief,” Hermes said.

In her room, Kino was lying face up on her bed wearing a shirt. She let out a breath, and then spoke.

“Ah, that was delicious…”

“That was disgusting. You don’t have to eat ‘til you drop,” Hermes said, appalled.

Kino spoke while looking at the ceiling.

“If you wish to be a traveler, you should be able to eat when it is time to eat. Someone wrote that in a book.”

“Yuck”

Outside the room, the sun has almost completely gone down, and the color of the sky has begun to change. The

sound of chairs and tables being cleaned up can be heard from the square.

"Miss Kino. Are you awake?" A voice was heard as someone knocked on the door.

"Message from the chief. We will be dividing the share with our comrades. Would you like to watch?"

—

The evening sun was shining golden on the sea. Two hovees were flying on the sea surface.

Kino, Hermes, the chief and a few others were riding in one of the hovees. Meanwhile, something was suspended from the other hovee. At the end of the rope the sheets containing the pieces of whale meat were wrapped together.

The hovee stopped a good distance from the coast.

The chief stood on the deck.

"Please accept this," he said in a short message. He lowered his hands lightly.

The rope on one side of the sheet disconnected, and the contents fell. The dead flesh scattered on the water. Soon, fish gathered in the place. A variety of fish, small and large, rushed and disturbed the surface of the water. Sea birds drifted overhead.

"Our comrades," the chief said.

"In nature, other creatures serve as food for other living things, just like us."

While looking leisurely below, "So, this is their share, eh?" Kino said approvingly.

The chief also looked below leisurely.

"Yes, they were raised eating other creatures, and in turn, get eaten by other creatures. In this ocean, our comrades live in great numbers, but never too many nor too few. Usually, we only take them during times of celebration."

“I see…,” Kino said, and slowly leaned on the edge of the deck. She looked at the sky to the west. The orange lump will soon be touching the horizon.

They parted with their comrades, and the hovee set on its homeward journey while casting its long shadow on the sea.

—

Evening. Kino was invited to have tea with the elders.

‘What are you planning to do tomorrow?’ asked the chief, to which Kino informed them of her intention to visit the highlands to the north.

And then the elders who were drinking tea suddenly exclaimed together.

“You’d better stop!”

Kino asked them if there’s something dangerous up there, but they only shook their heads. The chief spoke.

“Well no, I don’t think that’s the case. It’s just that…”

The chief made a sad face.

“Those people are very cruel. They’re totally incompatible with us.”

“Cruel, you say?” Kino asked, and the chief slowly nodded and spoke.

“However, I don’t think it’s a bad idea to see for yourself, Miss Kino, the cruelty and ugliness of those people.”

—

The next morning, Kino got up at dawn.

As usual, she performed her body exercises, and trained with and carried out the maintenance of her persuaders.

Kino was treated to a lavish breakfast in the chief’s home. In addition, she received a present of dried fish. Kino thanked them politely.

Kino rode up the path she went through the day before. She passed in front of the eastern gates.

After climbing up the hill for a while, the town amidst the dense forests came into sight at the end of the slope. Like the day before, a hovee glided beside them.

“Are you a traveler?” a man on the platform asked.

Kino and Hermes entered the town in front of the forest. On the right side, the forest with its bright leaves has spread and engulfed the white stone houses lined up on the slopes. Several people who caught sight of Kino and Hermes waved their hands from their windows.

The people gathered in a square around a wooden tower. Kino stopped Hermes as she was invited to come in. She exchanged greetings with the chief.

Everyone observed as the chief welcomed the rare visitor to the town and offered her lodgings and meals for free. Kino thanked him.

And then the chief suddenly asked Kino. "By the way, are you picky with food?"

"No. There's no particular food my stomach rejects. Also, I do not hate stuff served in feasts," Kino said immediately. The eyes of the residents glittered.

"Oh dear," Hermes muttered out of earshot.

For the welcoming feast, they will set off to hunt a creature. Kino was asked if she would like to watch.

So came the invitation, to which Kino readily agreed. She asked Hermes what to do,

"We're free after all," answered Hermes. Kino pushed him along and went aboard a hovee.

The group of hovees floated lowly, and glided into the forest. The hovee Kino and Hermes were riding followed to the air.

"Anyhow, the prey will be large. It will be an exciting hunt," the young man who was hired to be their guide said happily.

Below, on the hovee's deck, the men were assembling rockets similar as yesterday's.

And suddenly a voice came from the driver's seat.

"There it is! To the right!" He pointed in between the trees, where something moved.

The hovees scattered and approached, surrounding the tree. The hovee where Kino and Hermes was riding on slightly advanced. A person leaned over from the deck and waved a flag to indicate directions.

A big black shadow moved on the ground directly below the hovee where Kino was riding.

It was an enormous creature. An elongated nose protruded from its stone-like body. Its big ears shook, and its four fat legs slowly moved forward. From the tip of its extended nose up to its tail, it was twice as long as the hovee.

“It’s big,” Kino murmured.

“It’s an elephant. It is the largest creature in the forests. Is this your first time seeing one?”

“Yes. I only read about it in books. Even so, it’s really big.”

“So in a place like this, rest omitted,” Hermes said in a small voice. [10]

“Well, the show is just getting started. ——We will hunt *that*.”

The hovees approached it from both sides and dropped something on the sides of the elephant. They dropped several pieces of cylinders the size of small packets one at a time.

The packets exploded on the ground. The ground was hollowed out, and soil rose up in succession on both sides of the elephant. The muffled explosions echoed.

The huge form of the elephant trembled. As if in a rampage, the elephant’s footsteps resounded loudly as it fled. It ran towards the narrow spaces between the trees.

At that moment rockets were launched from the hovee which passed right beside it.

Whoosh—!

The rockets left a white trail of smoke, and hit the head of the elephant as it emerged from behind a tree.

Its head exploded.

Mixed flesh and blood scattered and fell on the ground with a wet sound.

In a moment, the elephant's huge form squirmed and hoisted its body in a straight position. Then it collapsed to the side, creating a tremor in the ground. Then it stopped moving. It stopped living. The deep red blood began to stain the ground.

"Great—!"

The guide and everyone on board the hovees raised a cheer.

A number of people holding ropes jumped down. Then they tied the elephant's limbs to several hovees.

They carried it in the air while the bulky corpse dripped blood along the way.

The headless elephant was raised onto the space near a fountain beside the square. Cheers rose from the people who were preparing the venue.

They began to take apart the body of the elephant. They hauled a large saw using a truck. Soon, the cobblestoned ground was stained dark with the spilled blood.

It was carved into big blocks and then several people carried them to the square and cut them to smaller pieces .

After they finished cutting the meat, it was divided into three portions. The chief explained to Kino.

“The ones placed beside the tent are for today’s feast. Those in the trucks will be stored for future use. And then,”

The chief pointed to the meat, bones and pieces of entrails piled high on top of a big sheet. Upon closer inspection, those were also parts meant for consumption.

"Those are *everybody else's* share."

"'Everybody else'?" Kino asked.

"They're not here right now. I'll introduce them later," said the chief, grinning.

"——Now, everyone let's eat."

With the chief's introduction, the people filled the square and started the banquet.

A plate was passed to Kino who was sitting nearby. Young women and rough-looking men in aprons were busy working. The chief told her that this country had good dishes, and above all, attractive people.

"Now, please have some too, Miss Kino," the chief urged her.

A grilled monkey was placed in one big platter. Its torso was gaping open, and chopped herbs were placed inside. Its legs were pointing towards the sky — it almost looked like a human baby.

Placed in another plate was the boiled head of a sheep with its brain exposed. Its clouded eyes, in which light

will never pass again, were scooped out and served as a side dish.

A number of live chicken were carried beside the square. The necks were placed and fixed between two bars, and were immediately cut off with a small axe. The headless bodies bolted, ran about the place for a while, and died. The chief said that they will be fried and eaten later.

Steaks were carried in — it was the meat of the elephant earlier. It seemed delicious as it was not too burnt, but blood accumulated on the dish.

“……”

Kino gazed at these for a while.

—

“Two days in a row,” Hermes said.

In her room, Kino was lying face up on her bed wearing a shirt. She let out a breath, and then spoke.

"Ah, that was delicious…"

"You sure feel great," Hermes said with a hint of sharpness in his tone.

Kino remained lying on the bed.

"It's not bad to see a country like this from time to time…. Even so, I didn't know that sheep brains were so soft and delicious. You shouldn't reject a food without trying it first, after all."

"Yuck"

Outside the room, the sun has almost completely gone down, and the color of the sky has begun to change. The sound of chairs and tables being cleaned up can be heard from the square.

"Miss Kino. Are you awake?" A voice was heard as someone knocked on the door.

"Message from the chief. We will be dividing the share with our comrades. Would you like to watch?"

—

Two hovees were flying over the forest permeated by dusk.

Kino, Hermes, the chief and a few others were riding in one of the hovees. Meanwhile, something was suspended from the other hovee. At the end of the rope the sheets containing the pieces of elephant meat were wrapped together.

The hovee stopped a good distance into the forest.

The chief stood on the deck.

"Please accept this," he said in a short message. He lowered his hands lightly.

The rope on one side of the sheet disconnected, and the contents fell. The dead flesh scattered on the ground. Soon, animals gathered in the place. From small ones, crows, to large carnivores, all of them ate up wholeheartedly.

“Our comrades,” the chief said.

“In nature, other creatures serve as food for other living things, just like us.”

While looking leisurely below, “So, this is their share, eh?” Kino said approvingly.

The chief also looked below leisurely.

“Yes, they were raised eating other creatures, and in turn, get eaten by other creatures. In this forest, our comrades live in great numbers, but never too many nor too few. Usually, we only take them during times of celebration.”

“I see…,” Kino said, and slowly leaned on the edge of the deck. She looked at the sky to the west. The orange lump will soon be touching the far-away mountain ridges.

They parted with their comrades, and the hovee set on its homeward journey while casting its long shadow on the forest.

—

Evening. Kino was invited to have tea with the elders.

'What did you do yesterday?' asked the chief, to which Kino replied that she stopped by the town along the sea.

And then the elders who were drinking tea suddenly exclaimed together.

"Those people are terrible!"

The chief made a sad face.

"Those people are very cruel. They live out in the sea, killing the cute fish and shellfish. These are taken alive, and they eat them, watching them die in cold blood. And in the end, they take the smart and adorable whales…"

The chief's tone became rough.

"And those people dare say that our life of dependence on the blessings of the forest is cruel, brutal and ruthless. They have no right to say such thing, as they themselves don't realize that what they are doing is the genuine form of cruelty. We can't just calmly ignore them and accept their customs."

"I see. So that's the reason why you have lived apart," Kino said, and the chief nodded slowly and spoke.

"However, I don't think it's a bad idea to see for yourself, Miss Kino, the cruelty and ugliness of those people."

—

The next day, that is, the morning of the third day since Kino entered the country.

Kino got up at dawn. As usual, she performed her body exercises, and trained with and carried out the maintenance of her persuaders.

Kino was treated to a lavish breakfast in the chief’s home. In addition, she received a present of dried meat. Kino thanked them politely.

Kino departed, turning back from the grand farewell she was given.

They ran through the deserted part of the country. It was already past noon when they arrived at the western wall.

They passed through the fully automatic gates, and went out of the country.

“Now, shall we go?” Hermes said happily, but Kino replied with a lifeless voice.

“No. Before that…”

“Hmm?”

“I’m hungry.”

‘Ah’, Hermes was appalled, and let out a sigh. And with a touch of sarcasm in his voice,

“Why, of course. If you eat just that at night and in the morning, your stomach will be bloated.”

“No choice. I’d better roast and eat the preserved stuff they gave me. We’ll leave after that.”

Kino dismounted Hermes and secured his center stand .

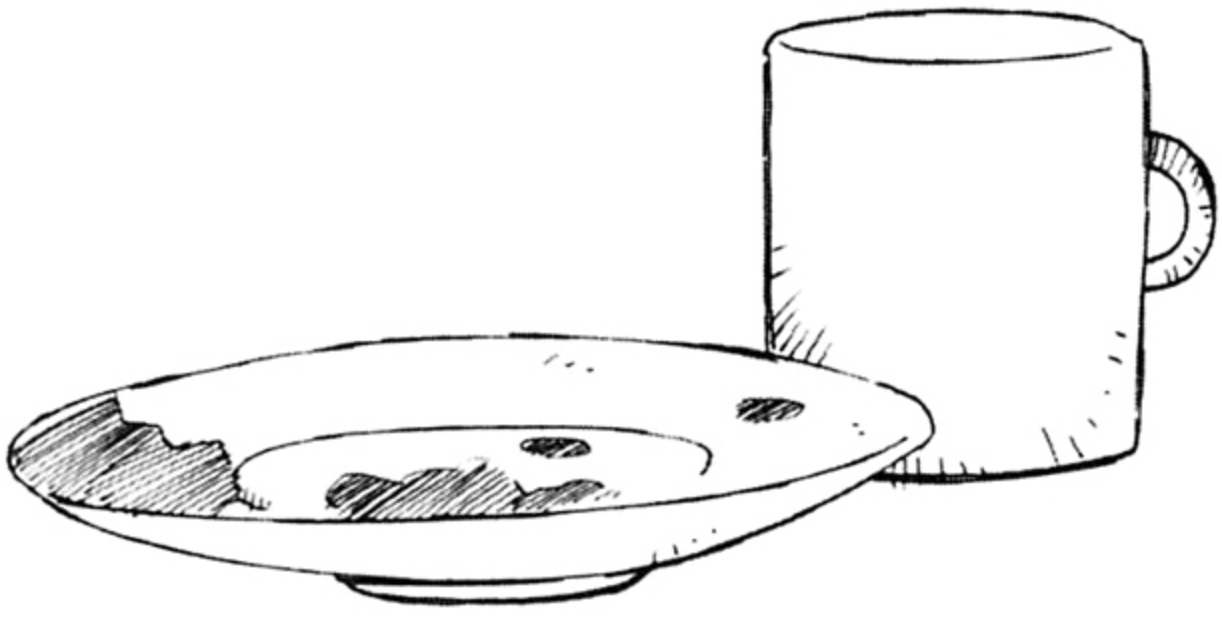
“Well, whatever. I suppose that’s better than you fainting and falling down due to an empty stomach,” said Hermes.

“By the way, the fish mummy or the animal mummy, which one will you eat?”

While groping for something inside her luggage,

“Both”

Kino answered flatly.



“Grapes” —On Duty—[11]

Chapter Seven

"Grapes"

— On Duty —

"Hey, you."

A man spoke all of a sudden.

The one he was talking to was a teenager drinking tea in the street's open café. This person had short black hair, big eyes, and an intrepid expression on her face. Her black jacket was fastened with a wide belt on her waist, and suspended on her right thigh was a holster for a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol).

The man who spoke was about thirty years old. He was a normal-looking man wearing neat clothes.

"Me?"

The man nodded in reply to this question. Parked in one corner of the walkway was a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) with two boxes attached on the sides of its rear wheel. He pointed towards the motorrad.

"That's yours? Are you a traveler?"

"Yes. We've been in this country since yesterday," the young traveler said, and proceeded to introduce herself.

"I am Kino. This here is my partner, Hermes."

"Kino, eh? Well, until when are you planning to continue doing this?" The man still stood, asking the traveler called in a sharp tone.

Kino asked the man with her usual expression. "Doing what?"

"Traveling on a motorrad. You seem very young, but why don't you go to school? Well, I suppose that's fine in the country you were born in, but if that's the case, why don't you get a job?"

"…It's hard to explain everything, you see," Kino answered with a shrug.

"Excuse me," the man said shortly, and sat in front of Kino.

The man looked at Kino, almost glaringly, "Is traveling fun?"

"Yes"

"Didn't you ever realize that you were wasting your life?"

"……"

The man had a tone as if scolding a bad student,

"You probably find what you are doing now as fun. Now, that is. However, your actions are without consideration for the future. You go from place to place, looking around, wandering aimlessly. But that's all. At a glance, you're free to do as you please. But with that, you are just playing, neglecting the duties that come with being a human. You are nothing but a rootless wanderer. "

"……"

Kino silently brought the cup of tea to her lips. The man continued.

"Humans have many duties they have to fulfill. First is work. To have a regular job, and to serve other people in the country. In short, you have a duty to become a full-fledged member of society by working. Another is to

get married and to have a family. To make your spouse happy, to have children, to bring them up well, and to send them out as new members of society. These are duties which humans had from the very start. Traveling, wandering, the you right now couldn't possibly accomplish these duties. Do you have any objections?"

"Nope," Kino replied with a light smile.

The man became slightly more garrulous.

"That's why traveling is a waste of your life. I told you before, right? You probably think I'm forcing this on you. Not to brag, but right now, I have those qualifications. You see, I have a job and a family to protect. That's why, I want you to think a little about the sort of life you have. That's why I talked to you."

"I see. I'll use that as a reference."

"And one more thing," said the man.

"Yes?"

"It would be better for you to stop riding a motorrad."

"Really?" Kino asked with a light tone.

“Yeah. Motorrads are dangerous. Besides, only two people can ride on it. It’s an extremely uncivilized and primitive method of transportation. It’s improper for an adult, worrying and inconveniencing your family with an egotistical plaything. A car on the other hand, is an important and a must-have because it offers a reliable means of transportation. Traveling and motorrads, that’s the worst combination, ever.”

Kino glanced over Hermes,

“Thank you for your concern. But I would like to continue doing this.”

Upon hearing this, the man’s face slightly stiffened. He pointed at Kino, and spoke with a tone stronger than before.

“You did not understand what I told you at all. What do you take the opinion of the elderly for? Just because you’re young, you think you can go on wasting your time——”

Suddenly the man was taken aback and his face changed color as he looked at his wristwatch. He stood up.

"Someday you'll regret what you did with your life!" He left these angry words and hurried away.

When the man was out of sight, Hermes spoke. "What an interesting person. I wonder what moved him to talk to you?" said.

"Oh, you were awake. Who knows? Maybe he bears a grudge against travelers and motorrads," Kino said. She picked up the cup of tea and spread the map with her other hand.

"Well, it doesn't matter. Hermes. Let's go see the temple in the southern district after I finish my tea. The person who was here earlier promised me that it's worth seeing."

"Roger. We'll be very busy in this country, huh?"

"Yeah. I wonder if three days is enough. There's this fellow in the north which has skills of 'ancient giant creatures' that I want to see. But it seems that near some stone highway, there's some awesome scenery. I also like to try their pan-baked deep-sea fish, but I also want to go to this open-air concert. And then——"

—

The man hurriedly ran to the entrance of a street where several stores were lined up.

An aging woman, a woman around thirty, and two small children were standing by the entrance. They all glared at the man who came running.

“You’re late! You left the car, and made us wait for hours!” The woman who seemed to be the wife, spoke to the man with a harsh tone.

‘Sorry, I’m really sorry,’ the man said, bowing several times.

“You should really get a hold of yourself,” the wife clicked her tongue.

At this moment, they heard the noisy sound of a motorrad’s engine, and eventually, the traveler passed in front of them riding her motorrad. The traveler saw the man, raised her left hand in a greeting, and rode away.

"Who was that?" the wife asked the man.

The man said that it was just a traveler he had a little conversation with earlier. The wife suddenly raised her eyes.

"Traveler? Wait, dear! Don't tell me you still have that stupid idea of yours to go on a journey by yourself?" the wife cross-examined him. 'No, not at all,' said the man, and shook his head and hands.

"Is that true?"

'It's true,' said the man as his wife glared at him. 'That' s not a simple thing to do since I have a family, and a job as well,' he added.

"Fine then," the wife turned around and then stopped.

"Ah—! Don't tell me you want to ride a motorrad? You vowed never to do that, but if I find out you're secretly riding one, I'll divorce you!"

'D-don't worry. Didn't I sell it? A motorrad is dangerous. I'm thinking about our family's welfare, so I can't possibly be thinking of riding one,' the man said.

"Hmph. Don't you dare break your promise. It will be a problem if you die. …More than that, you should work harder to have a salary raise. Aren't you supposed to buy the children nice clothes?" the woman said disinterestedly, and the aging woman chimed in.

"That's right. You promised to make my daughter happy when you married her, didn't you? If there's no hope of getting ahead, then get ahead on your own. Work two, no, three times as much to make your own wife and children happy. That's the meaning of being a full-fledged member of society, the duty of a human being. Do you understand?"

'Yes,' the man said shortly to his mother-in-law.

The wife pushed her hand luggage to the man.

"Then, let's go! And get these quickly! You should serve your family once in a while! Quick, quick!"

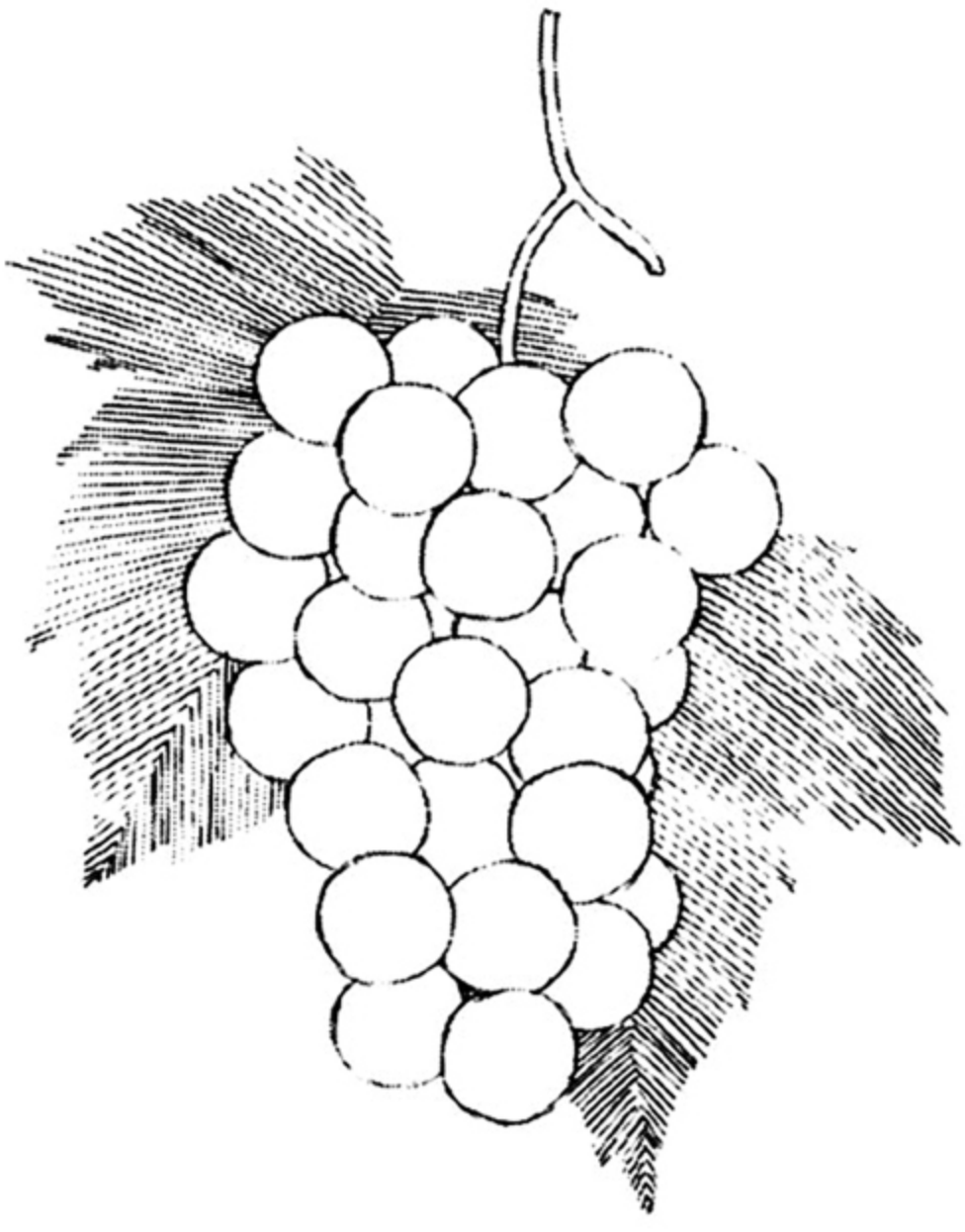
They entered the shopping district with the children.

'But I'm tired from work,' the man muttered and sighed.

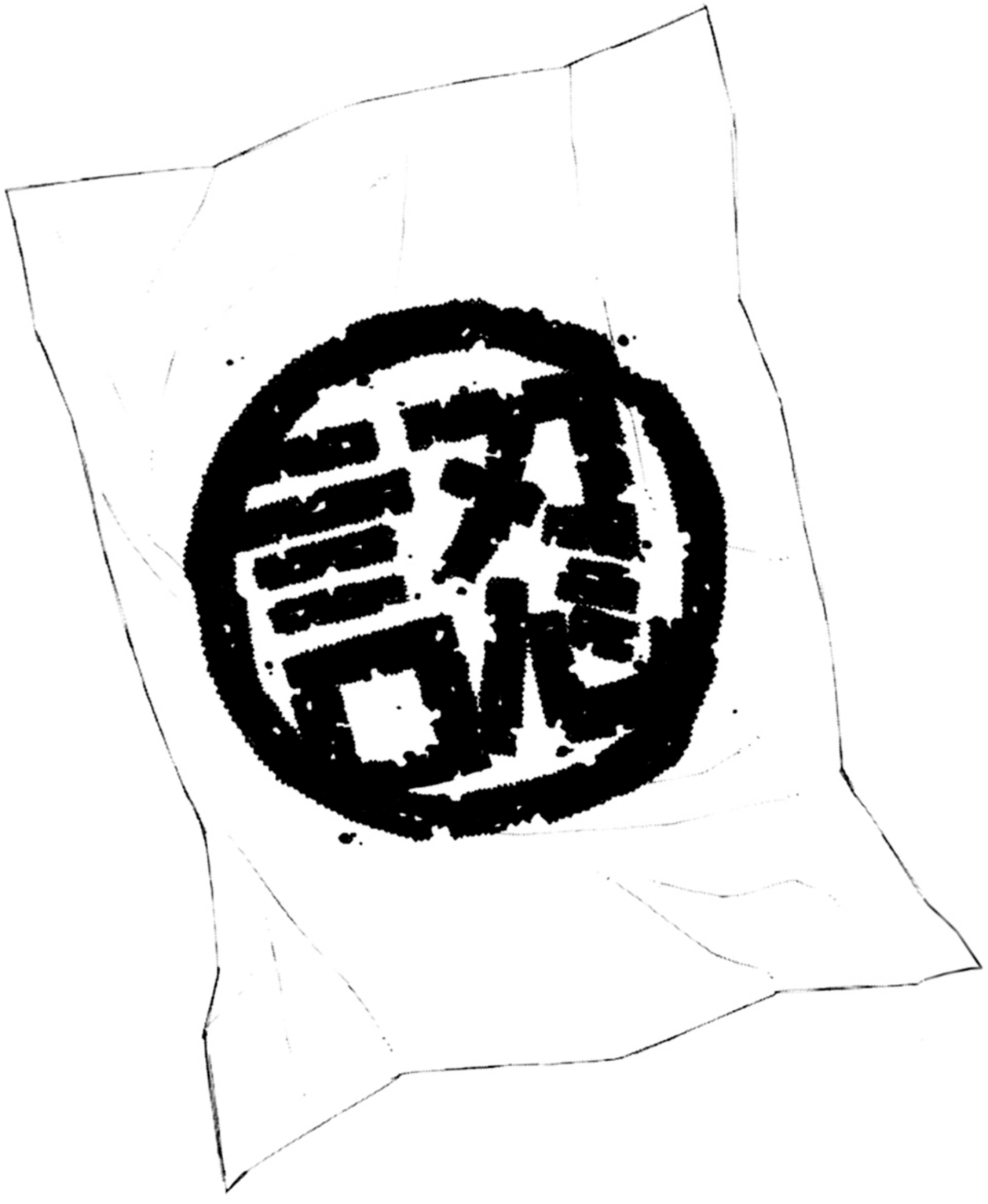
"Did you say something?" the wife asked without turning around, and the man immediately replied, ' Nothing.'

The man turned his gaze towards the road. He looked at the unseen back of the traveler, and listened to the inaudible sound of the motorrad's engine.

And then chased after his family in a flurry.



“Land of Acknowledgement” —A Vote—



Chapter Eight

"Land of Acknowledgment"

— A Vote —

A motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was running on a meadow with a sparse growth of bushes.

The motorrad was loaded with traveling luggage on both sides and on top of its rear wheel. It was running on a road extending straight ahead, while letting its engine's roar resound loudly. The reddish brown earth of the road was finely cracked due to the dry season.

The driver was wearing a brown coat, the extra long hem of which was rolled up to her thighs. She was wearing a hat with flaps covering her ears and goggles on her eyes. The face underneath it was young, around mid-teens.

Probably due to the glare of the sun right ahead, the driver lowered the brim of her hat a little with her left hand.

"Yup, I don't need it after all," the driver said all of a sudden. The motorrad asked in return.

"What? Kino."

"My coat. I don't need it while riding in this kind of season. It's a little hot, see."

The driver called Kino opened the collar of the coat to let in some air. She was wearing a black jacket underneath.

"Do you want to stop to take it off?" the motorrad asked.

"Nope, it's fine. I can already see it. Look, Hermes."

Kino pointed ahead of the road just before the horizon, at the rectangular shadows which were like rods laid down on the ground. Those were the walls of a country.

"I'll wear just my jacket when we leave that country. The coat will be on top of the carrier. Since it will get hotter soon, I don't have to replace my thin shirt, either."

"What about the snowsuit? I suppose you won't need it anymore?" the motorrad called Hermes asked. Kino nodded.

"Oh, right. Then I probably wouldn't need the winter cap and the winter gloves either. After this, I can't afford

to carry too much until the next winter. Maybe I'll sell them or exchange them for something, only I won't throw them away. I took quite a liking to them," Kino said with a slightly regretful tone.

"Well, it can't be helped. Humans have a talent for completely discarding things that they don't need, you know," Hermes said in a consoling tone, and continued.

"Occasionally you'd see clumsy people, who don't throw away things that they don't need and have half of their rooms occupied."

"There was an author who was like that. He suffered because he can't throw away his books," said Kino.

The walls quickly became higher as they approached, and eventually they arrived in front of the gates.

—

They passed through the immigration inspection by the gates.

Kino was referred to a hotel. By the time they arrived, the sun has already gone down.

After taking a shower and a meal, Kino rested in the lobby and looked at the country's map.

"Oh! Welcome, traveler! It's nice of you to come! Welcome to this hotel!"

Kino turned around as she was called by a big, heavily accented voice.

"You see, I am the owner of this hotel. Well, have a seat. If there's anything you don't understand about this country, I'll show you the ropes."

The man spoke loudly to the puzzled Kino. His voice echoed in the lobby. He seemed a little drunk. An employee at the reception desk overtly frowned upon this, looking at Kino.

Kino introduced herself and sat on the sofa. The man sat facing her.

Without waiting to be asked, the man talked about how he started the hotel by himself. In a one-sided

conversation, he told her in a loud voice that right now, everything was left to the youngsters while he enjoyed a leisurely life.

Kino responded agreeably, as appropriate.

"Miss traveler must be here in time with the festival?"

Kino asked what he meant.

"Oh, so you didn't know? Ok! I'll tell you. First, I'll tell you a bit about this country," the man said and explained in simple terms.

This country was a kingdom, and there was a custom that the king should be a doctor.

The country has a well-founded social security system. All medical expenses are waived, and everyone receives treatment from the royal hospital. Moreover, under the king's rule, the social status of those who were working as doctors was high.

"And, the so-called festival is not actually a festival, but more of an election day. The festival is just a bonus for the election. It's a festival in honor of the election," the man said.

"An election, is it? What do you decide on?"

The man grinned to Kino's question. Then he lowered his voice on purpose.

"We decide on a 'person who is not needed'. That person will be ordered dead. You see, unnecessary things should be disposed of completely."

—

The man said that this was a historically significant thing , and began to explain about the election.

About 150 years ago, this country experienced a severe food crisis due to incessant poor harvests. Hunger and epidemic was widespread.

The king at the time planned a mass killing as a last resort. To select the people who would die, the citizens were made to vote on 'a person important to them', and the country decided to kill everyone 'who was not

chosen’. Even if he himself was chosen, the king would execute it.

Out of fear of the voting results, no one wanted to be ‘ unnecessary’ to anyone. ‘Even though we are under such a crisis, there was no one who was deemed unnecessary ____’

The king was deeply moved by his people’s awareness , and was ashamed of his decision. In the end he chose to share and overcome the difficulties with everybody.

Soon they triumphed over the crisis, and this idea became a trigger to create the present welfare state this country has become.

Ever since, they made sure to perform an annual election with this historically significant meaning in mind. All citizens who can write shall write down the names of people important to them.

Every year, everybody’s name was written down. In this country, all people lived interdependently. Everyone celebrates that fact.

"I see…. Then, the truth is no one is actually disposed of? " Kino asked.

"Why, of course! That's unheard of. We're different from the sort of crazy country who would say, 'Because you're unnecessary, you'll have to die.' Just in case, we do have equipment for the disposal, but it has never been used once. It's getting rusty there in the castle, where it serves as decoration. What do you think? It's a nice story, isn't it? Impressed, aren't you!" the man said, letting out a rather annoying laugh with his heavily accented voice.

"Uhmm…"

A man around thirty who was wearing a suit stood next to the man, and spoke to him with a slightly troubled face.

"Father, may I request you to be a bit more quiet?"

"What?! Since when did you become so important?! This is the hotel I started, you know. Do you understand that?" The man yelled back. The man in the suit was flustered.

"Yes, but——"

"Hey! Go away now! Get to work! If you can slack off like me, you still have a long way to go. You are twenty years too early to dictate me! I'm with a visitor right now ! Now, manager, do you get that?! What do you say now ?"

"…Yes"

The son did not argue anymore, and left with a bitter face. The man looked at the back of his son, and snorted.

The man faced Kino again and spoke with a voice as loud as ever.

"Well, in the festival, everyone makes a lot of noise when they are drunk. Miss traveler, please feel free to join in. Everything's free, and there are lots of delicious food and side dishes."

"Thank you very much," Kino thanked him meekly.

After this, Kino asked if there's a place where she could exchange, or possibly sell the winter equipment that she no longer needs.

'Oh!' the man was surprised.

"Leave it to me. Tomorrow, I'll ask the shop that supplies the hotel to collect your stuff for a high price, whether it be rags. We've been partners for a long time. They ought to consider something like that. When the festival starts, go to my place." The man laughed again with his loud voice.

Kino spoke. "That's very helpful."

"Don't mention it! Humans live to help each other! Then that means I just became a person important to you, miss traveler!" The man roared without regard for those around him.

Kino looked around the lobby for a bit, and asked.

"By the way, am I allowed to vote?"

"It's too bad, but travelers aren't allowed to," the man said.

—

It was the morning of the second day since they entered the country.

Kino woke up at dawn.

She performed her light exercises beside Hermes, who was fast asleep. Kino trained with and maintained her hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) called 'Canon'.

Several fireworks went off as Kino was eating her breakfast. In the road, a public announcement vehicle has been going around to broadcast, 'Everyone, today is the election day. Please do not forget to cast your votes.'

Kino returned to her room after her meal.

She opened the bag and took out the thick winter jacket and pants, the winter cap with ear covers, and the leather winter gloves. She folded them neatly and placed them on top of the desk.

She gazed at these for a while, and whispered.

"You were very helpful. …Thank you."

"You're welcome," said Hermes.

"What, so you were awake," Kino turned around with a smile.

"Nope. I was talking in my sleep."

"Really now…. Well, it's almost time for you to wake up anyway," Kino said, and Hermes replied with a grave tone.

"That's difficult, you know. 'In spring one sleeps a sleep that knows no dawn.'"

"……"

Kino fell silent.

"What's the matter, Kino?"

"You did not make a mistake."

"How *rude*."

—

Kino and Hermes went to visit the polls. They followed the people walking down the street.

The people were entering a large building surrounded by greenery at the center of the country. She received an explanation from the guards that the king serves as the director of the central hospital.

Kino and Hermes were not allowed to enter, so they simply observed the entrance for a while.

"For sure, your name will not be written this year."

"Oh, yours too."

A couple holding hands teased each other. There were also people who come with their families and ate their breakfasts leisurely on the lawn after voting.

"It's so peaceful, isn't it?" Hermes said.

—

At a little past noon, Kino was having a cup of tea in the cafeteria when fireworks set off once more. Someone announced that the election was over. The results were being tabulated, and once it turns out that 'no one was unnecessary', the festival will start.

"We'll know by evening. Well, no one gets chosen every year, anyway," someone said.

Later in the afternoon, Kino and Hermes finished their sightseeing and returned to the hotel. Stalls and tables were being set up and decorated in the roads and plaza around the hotel as hastily-made preparations for the festival.

Around the time the sun sank beneath the walls, the fireworks resounded for the third time. And then the public announcement vehicle broadcasted that the festival will be carried out as planned.

The festival began by twilight. There were lights everywhere, and the town has become lively.

Kino found the hotel owner and asked whether he was able to inquire about the sale of her winter equipment. ' Ok! Leave it to me,' the man, considerably drunk, said in a loud voice and led Kino to a nearby store.

He stormed in with a shout, and asked the shop owner how much he will take the items for. The owner gave his price. 'We were friends, weren't we? Raise it a bit more,' the man pushed his considerably unreasonable request. After arguing for a while, the man reluctantly agreed to a much too high price, with a disagreeable look on his face.

"See ya! Enjoy the festival, miss traveler!" The man left the store with high spirits. The shop owner sent him off with impassive eyes.

Kino talked to the shop owner.

"That person seems to know a lot of people."

The owner looked at Kino,

"And when you realized that, you asked him for assistance… that makes you one ugly customer. But if you don't do such things, traveling would be hard, I suppose. Well, whatever. Don't worry about it."

"Thanks. By the way, will you please give me four of those shirts?"

'Coming,' said the owner, and wrapped the shirts in paper. Then he suddenly stopped.

"…You know, that person was not like that before. He started on his own and managed a splendid hotel, and yet he lost his wife. After he was advised by those around him to retire, he just drowned himself in alcohol everyday. But now, not only the neighbors, even his family and employees consider him a nuisance. Really, I don't want to be like that. Alive just to cause trouble to someone," the owner said with a bored tone.

'I see,' Kino murmured quietly.

After that, Kino slipped into the festival only to eat the food that was handed out. Then she returned to buy the things that she needed with a low price.

By the time she returned to the hotel, the hotel owner was drunken in the streets, making a lot of noise.

—

The next day, that is, the morning of the third day since Kino entered the country.

As usual Kino got up at dawn, then trained with and maintained Canon.

After a while, Kino noticed that it was a little noisy in the streets. She looked from the window and saw a car stop in front of the entrance. Several uniformed policemen entered.

Kino went down to the lobby. The son and family of the owner, dressed in pajamas, as well as the other employees were talking with the police.

Kino asked a hotel boy what happened. He answered with a grim expression,

"The owner is dead."

"?"

Kino listened to his version of the story.

The owner did not go home last night, but no one worried because of the festival. However, he was

discovered, collapsed in a back alley this morning. He was moved to the hospital and confirmed dead. It was a heart attack, apparently.

"That's why I told him to stop drinking too much…," the owner's son said lifelessly, completely dazed.

After this, Kino looked on as the son and the family went away with the police.

He asked the boy whether there will be a funeral today .

The boy answered, "Nope. Too bad miss traveler, but in this country, there's no such thing as a funeral. After the family is finished parting with the deceased, as early as this afternoon, the ashes will be put in the country's mass cemetery…. After all, a human should exist only until the time of his death."

Around noon.

Kino arranged her luggage, refilled Hermes with fuel, and departed. She was wearing her jacket, fastened with a wide belt on her waist. Canon's holster was suspended from her right thigh.

The coat was rolled and tied up on the carrier.

They soon came to the western gate, where something like a park was spread out on the right side of the road. Big trees were planted on the ground, and here and there , benches, roofed lounges, and big stone monuments were built.

Several people were gathered in one corner, busy over something. When they broke up, they went towards the direction of Kino and Hermes. One person saw Kino and called out, 'Hey, miss traveler.' It was the dead owner's son.

"We're finished. It's that stone monument over there. If you like…"

"Sure"

"We have to return now. Take care, miss traveler."

After waiting for the group to pass through the gates, Kino pushed Hermes towards the stone monument.

A young man wearing a white robe and several workers who were cleaning were left behind.

"Doctor, we'll be going ahead," the workers addressed the man in the white robe. Afterwards, they collected their tools and returned to the gate.

The man wrote something in his documents. He noticed Kino and spoke while his hand moved.

"I am a doctor. I have to write down the proof of burial."

"I see."

Kino went in front of the stone monument, took off her hat, lightly closed her eyes, and moved her mouth a little. She explained to the doctor that she stayed in the buried man's hotel.

"Is that so?" the doctor murmured. His hand stopped and he looked at Kino.

"Ah, uhmm… I'm sure you are about to leave the country, and have a long way to go. But, can I have some of your time? I just want to talk to you about something."

"I guess it won't hurt."

"What? Is it an interesting story?" Hermes asked.

The doctor replied, "Well, I don't know if you'll find it interesting or not, but I'm sure it will make a good souvenir for your travels. It's about this country's wonderful system."

—

The doctor finished working on the details in the documents and closed the file. After that, he guided Kino and Hermes to the nearest lounge.

The doctor suggested that Kino take a seat, and was about to sit down himself when he stopped and said that his robe will get dirty. Kino parked Hermes on the side and sat on him.

“Well, what’s the story about?” Hermes asked. The doctor smiled lightly, and spoke with a fairly normal tone.

“The truth is, that guy who died this morning, and was buried a while ago, was killed by me.”

Kino asked Without changing her expression. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it means just that. I killed that man with my own hands. When he was carried to the central hospital this dawn, it was merely acute alcohol intoxication, but his awareness was clouded. After the treatment, we confirmed that he was an ‘anonymous’. And so I had to inject a drug into his IV drip, and he died. I was slightly nervous. After all, it was the first time I did it on my own .”

“I don’t get it. What’s an ‘anonymous’?” Hermes asked .

The doctor said, "Ah, I'm sorry. Let me see… 'anonymous', in this country's medical terms, is what we call the people whose names were not written by anyone in the election. Those whose continuous existence was determined to be useless. Uhmm, are you aware of the election, and its historical background?"

Kino nodded and spoke. "But I heard that no one has been discarded from the very beginning up to now."

The doctor spoke with an amused tone, "All of those were lies."

"…Then, in reality, you got rid of people before?"

The doctor nodded. "Yes. Since the start of the great famine, there was a fair amount of anonymous. Mainly, we thin out the population with children, or useless old people. The king at the time was a person of conviction. He would do something once he decided to. But of course, public executions leave a bad taste. If his rule were to be thought of as a reign of terror, the rest of the people who were chosen as 'necessary' will not be too happy. And so as not to bother anyone psychologically, we came up with the idea of disposing people in secret."

"To be exact, how did you do it?" Hermes asked.

"It's simple. Ah, did you know? The king is a doctor. He is the head of the central hospital, and all doctors are directly under him," the doctor said a little proudly. Kino nodded.

"We doctors perfected a variety of means to dispose of people in the hospital. Once the voting results are out, the names are added to the list. On the instance that that person is brought into the hospital, he will be killed right there and then. Until the next election, that is."

"I see." "Uh-huh"

"Those who are seriously ill or injured will die even if you leave them alone. Those who are not will be disposed of by saying that their condition has changed suddenly and that they are to be given a drug through their IV drip. The easiest to deal with, and the most common, are traffic accidents. If the injury is not a big deal, you can reason out that they hit their head and had a brain hemorrhage. Another simple case would be alcohol poisoning," the doctor continued.

"However the truth is, sometimes, there are anonymous which are vigilant and leaves no openings.

There are people who don't get sick or injured. In those cases, we can't do anything. We dispose of them by making up a sickness during the annual physical examination mandated by law."

Kino asked, "And you continued to do this every year?"

"Yes, that's right. It has become something like a tradition. In a year, there's about a dozen. The people who are disposed of, that is."

"Was it ever exposed?"

"Well, there are some suspicions…. However, even if the official cause of death is accidental, no matter how you look at it, the truth is they died because they're 'not useful to anyone'. Nobody was suspicious enough to meddle with and question the cause of death. At first, the families would grieve exaggeratedly. But they are actually secretly delighted, and by the next day, no, as soon as the burial is over, they'd go about their lives afresh. They will be given their insurance punctually, and the country will answer for the burial expenses. In

cases of traffic accidents, the perpetrators who unknowingly lent a hand in the disposal will be judged rather favorably."

"I see."

The doctor turned over the documents he was holding.

"Uhm, in this person's case…, ah, as expected, there were less votes for him in the previous year, as well as in the year before that. Recently, he was becoming more and more annoying. That he was the first to be disposed this term is purely coincidental. He was carried into the hospital just when the duty was left to me. It was a simple case."

The doctor closed the documents. And then he let out a big breath.

"But, I was really pretty nervous. I wouldn't know what to do if he wakes up while I was doing it. But I finished it safely, wrote the medical certificate, and now the burial is also over. Again I feel that my experience as a doctor piled up. That's why I wanted to talk about this to someone," the doctor said, slightly embarrassed.

"Only the doctors know about this? Or are the nurses involved too?"

The doctor nodded to Kino's question.

"Only the doctors and the nurses. After graduating from the royal university in medicine and nursing, there's a national certification exam. When you pass, there will be an audience with the king who will personally tell everything to you for the first time. Ah, actually, the disposal can only be done by doctors."

"When you learned about it for the first time, what did you think?"

"I was… impressed. I was surprised, and there was that feeling of being deceived. However, the king's powerful words touched my heart: 'Ladies and Gentlemen. Useless things are not necessary. The preservation of anyone who holds value to people or to the country, and the complete disposal of the unnecessary ones is important. And you who are here now, who have the highest skills and ambition, will now bear this obligation.' ——Well…, I was deeply moved…"

The doctor's eyes moistened slightly. And then he looked at Kino, eager to speak.

"I was thinking, humans are supposed to live among themselves, right? And so, those who are determined to be unnecessary should not exist. They have to be discarded. This is a very natural thing. It is to build a country without waste. It's a genuine welfare program. And all of that was accomplished with only the medical field involved. That's why I find this job very rewarding. "

Kino was silent while listening to the doctor's story.

"Was there ever a case where you failed to get rid of someone?" Hermes asked.

"That's unthinkable!" the doctor said with a loud voice as he got fired up.

"It's unforgivable for doctors and nurses to fail! We take pride in that. If there's a chance that a person will fail because of pressure in time and situation, then his wisdom will be complemented by a number of people

with knowledge and experience. If a person can't still do it even with that, then he has to return his diploma immediately," the doctor said with a stern tone.

"I want to gain more and more experience in healing as well as in disposing. 'A person who saves should be certain to save, and a person who disposes should be certain to dispose.' I want to be able to stand on my own soon."

"I see. Yup. That was quite interesting," Hermes said. The doctor was embarrassed for being slightly fired up.

"Thank you for listening to my story. Inside the country, such a thing cannot be mentioned, so now I'm totally refreshed. Miss traveler, if ever your body's condition gets bad, don't hesitate to come anytime. I will take responsibility for your care. No matter how difficult an operation is, or how long the hospitalization will take, and even if it's a traveler, we do not take any payment. This country is proud of delivering the best treatment there is."

The doctor lightly shook hands and returned to the gates.

Kino pushed Hermes out of the cemetery and started the engine. She looked once at the stone monument, and took off.

"……"

For a while, Kino rode Hermes in silence. They went through the meadow road lined up with bushes.

Eventually, Hermes spoke. "Kino. Let me guess what you're thinking right now."

"Hmm? Oh," Kino said.

"That's amazing, if you can guess it," she added.

Hermes spoke with an air of importance, "Well…, from that doctor's story, and based on my own experience up to now, you must be thinking like this,

'Ah, it's just that…. I don't have any big injuries or anything, but it would have been nice to receive some medical exam in the hospital. Even though I hate injections.'"

"……"

Kino fell silent. The motorrad ran smoothly, its well-regulated engine echoing.

"Hermes…"

"Hmm?"

Kino spoke with a sour face. "That's correct. Word for word."

"Isn't it?!" Hermes said happily. And immediately,

"Ah! Which reminds me," he said with a loud voice. ' What?' asked Kino.

"Did you sell the winter gloves?"

"Yeah," Kino nodded.

"But, didn't you say that you don't like the gloves you have because they hurt, and so you would set it aside for picking up firewood or working until it's all tattered? Not too long ago."

"……"

Kino suddenly hit the brakes. The rear wheel loudly stopped with a slide.

Kino faced the road that she has just ridden through. She could not even see the shadow of the walls beyond the horizon.

"…I did say that."

Kino gazed at the road with a disappointed look on her face, and Hermes spoke with a perfectly normal tone.

"How unexpected of Kino to make a careless mistake."

"……"

Kino shook her head lightly. Her face still had a bitter look.

"What now? Are we going back?"

"We can't do that," was Kino's firm answer to Hermes' question.

"What about the gloves?"

While looking at the direction they were heading to, and moving the front wheel towards that course, Kino answered,

"Someday, somewhere, I'll find a replacement for it."

"I see."

"Let's go."

After saying this, she launched Hermes.

In a moment, the spinning rear wheel kicked up dirt, and the motorrad rode away.

“A Tale of Extortion” —Bloodsuckers—

Chapter Nine

“A Tale of Extortion”

— Bloodsuckers —

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, white, bushy fur. My face makes me look like I'm always happy and smiling, but it doesn't mean that I am. I'm just born this way.

Shizu is my master. He is a young man who is always wearing a green sweater. He lost his homeland due to some complex circumstances, and is now traveling by buggy.

And I am together with him.

There was a time.

We stumbled upon a country in a highland covered with forests.

The people used the gentle slopes as dairy farms. Between the level land at the bottom of the valley and the

river was a town. There were high walls bordering the town, while the farms were surrounded by simple enclosures built from stones.

“What a peaceful and beautiful place,” Master Shizu said happily from the driver’s seat. He was clad in his usual green sweater.

“It’s small though, as if it’s only a village,” I said.

“It’s not necessarily a good thing for a country to be big. The question is, whether its inhabitants are living in happiness and contentment,” Master Shizu continued with a calm tone and narrowed eyes.

“But there is no answer to the question of what happiness actually is. Neither is there one to the question of what is important and what is not.”

“……”

Master Shizu, who realized that I was looking at him, suddenly laughed.

“For now, let’s check it out.”

He turned on the gears of the buggy.

We descended the slope.

The residents who were doing farm work noticed the buggy, and looked alarmed for a moment. Master Shizu got off the buggy. He walked closer and called out to them, but they hurriedly returned to the country. After waiting for a while, several men came.

Master Shizu introduced himself as a traveler, and asked permission to enter and stay in the country. The men asked Master Shizu if he had any weapons.

Master Shizu showed them his favorite sword beside the driver’s seat. When he was asked whether this was all that he had, Master Shizu nodded. They then asked him if he doesn’t mind that they could not offer him hospitable accommodations. Master Shizu nodded once more, and they gave their approval.

We were told to keep the buggy in a big storehouse near the gate, and that the reason will be explained to us later.

Master Shizu hid the buggy and took his big black cloth bag. His sword was inside it. We walked after a guide and passed through the gates.

Houses no higher than two floors were densely built in the entire town. The alleyways were like mazes in complexity.

Master Shizu looked leisurely at these and commented on their antiquity and peculiarity. When we arrived at a place where the alleys bend back and forth complicatedly every few steps, Master Shizu remarked,

“This place is perfect for hide-and-seek.”

The guide only gave him a somewhat incredulous look .

After walking around the town for a while, Master Shizu and I were guided to a house where the residents gather.

Apparently, it was this country’s assembly hall. There were a number of men and women distributing tea. Master Shizu was invited to take a seat, and then they exchanged greetings.

For the time being, they welcomed the visitor.

“A traveler, eh? Well, what do I say…, we would like to welcome you, but you have come at an inopportune time,” one man said with a gloomy expression. The other men had the atmosphere fit for a funeral.

“There seems to be some problem…. If you don’t mind …,” Master Shizu said.

They looked at each other for a while, and one of them opened his mouth to speak.

“Thieves are sponging off our country.”

Their story went like this.

For ages, this country had no foreign enemies; the people lived a happy and leisurely life.

The country was small and had no army or police. Rare disputes were suppressed by the young men.

Several years ago, a group of men riding horses came to the country. Because they were starving, they wickedly killed and ate some of the livestock.

Naturally, the residents objected and defied them. However, the men who tried to stop these thieves were killed.

The residents trembled in fear before the thieves. They were coerced to prepare food for the thieves who will visit once every month. If they dared refuse, the thieves threatened to rampage and destroy the country.

“Even if we have walls, we cannot leave behind our crops, and if the river is poisoned, we will not be able to

live. In the end, we decided that if it's just food, then we can abide to their wishes. We had to pick up the courage to make that bitter choice," one man said.

"I see," Master Shizu said softly.

Ever since, the thieves would come punctually each month, and leave after shamelessly taking the food.

Because of them, there was nothing left of the food that the people kept in reserve until then. If there were to be a severe crop failure, the residents will surely starve. Everyone had to work hard day by day.

"This disturbed our peaceful lives greatly, and it has been tormenting our minds recently…," one man said.

"I understand it very well. Thank you for telling me this painful story," so said Master Shizu. He pondered something for a while, and then asked,

"When would they be here next?"

"Tomorrow. We have prepared the food. But we don't know how long we had to endure this."

"How many of them are there?"

"There are always around twenty people. However, they're all men, and all ride horses and carry persuaders (Note: a gun)…. They don't think anything of killing people. You too mister traveler should better be careful not to run into them during your travels. They might take away your car and kill you."

"Mister traveler, if you can, when you arrive in a nearby country, please tell them of our suffering and ask them to save us. However… there can't be any country that would send people to help a small country such as this on a whim, right? There's no merit to it at all…. We understand that. We have to solve our own problems. But, no matter how you look at it, what's impossible cannot be done. It's embarrassing, but the only thing we can think of now is how we won't survive without that food," one man said sorrowfully. The other residents nodded with faces of resignation.

Master Shizu contemplated about something once more.

And then, he told the gloomy men that he has a question.

‘What is it?’ the men replied. With all attention on him, Master Shizu asked with a smile,

“Do you mind if I take another look at the town? I have taken quite an interest in it.”

—

Taking a young man with him as a guide, Master Shizu examined the minute details of the town with relish. He went around, alley by alley, and confirmed the complex connections. He would come and go around the same place repeatedly.

The women and children were looking at him curiously as if thinking, ‘What in the world is this traveler doing?’ Meanwhile, I…

“A dog—. So big and so white—”

…was chased around by the children.

There was a plaza near the gates. Over there, the residents were stacking up boxes and sacks. The guide spoke.

"Those are… the food that will be taken away tomorrow."

"That's a lot. I understand your worry if that much is being taken away from you. During that time, what do the residents do?" Master Shizu asked.

"Because no one wants to get killed, everyone hides in the storage area in their basements. Nobody else goes out . Nothing's happened yet, but if they start taking women and children…, ah, we can't bear the thought."

"I see," Master Shizu said in a small voice to the man who answered with a shake of his head.

—

That evening.

They provided one room in the assembly hall for Master Shizu and me. It was a small room with just one bed, but Master Shizu composedly accepted his simple dinner and politely expressed his gratitude.

"Beholden for a night's lodging and a meal, eh?" I asked Master Shizu, who started to maintain his sword under the light of a lamp.

Master Shizu took ample of time conditioning his sword, and then returned it to its sheath when he was finished.

"I don't think it's such a big deal," Master Shizu said as he looked at me.

"I can help these people in trouble. I don't really need any other particular reason. It's also possible that I'm not doing it for their sake."

"I see. How are you planning to do it?"

"I'll 'persuade' them," was Master Shizu's short answer.

I asked, "I don't think this country's residents would approve of your plan without raising any objection. It's

not a pretty thought, to have the residents annihilated by your meddlesome actions, don't you think?"

"Yeah, that's why I'm doing this on my own accord.… However, that doesn't mean that I have already decided to do it."

"?"

Master Shizu looked at my face and spoke in jest, "If I can't 'persuade' them, I'll turn tail and run."

And then he continued, "That's why the inhabitants of this country are totally blameless. There are things that people can and cannot do. There are things that are suited for someone like me, and things that I'm not cut out for."

I asked him one more question.

"Do you like this country?"

Master Shizu smiled a little.

"Maybe"

The next day.

All of the residents stubbornly locked themselves up in their houses since morning. The weather was good, but there was nobody walking around in the town.

We were also told to stay hidden in the basement, but we did not. We stayed in our room.

Master Shizu wore his waterproof parka with a hole on its left hip, and hung onto his neck the goggles he uses when driving the buggy.

A film [12] was affixed on the goggles in front of the eyes. Its roll case was attached on both sides. With a single pull of a string, he can clear his field of vision in a moment, in case it gets soiled by mud or other dirt.

Master Shizu looked at the plaza from the window, his favorite sword by his side.

The boxes containing food were piled up, and tied up along with it is a goat. Right before it were the gates that will be opened by the thieves.

I was lying on my side by Master Shizu's feet, waiting.

—

Probably about noon, the sound of advancing horses was heard. It was headed towards our direction.

"So they've come," Master Shizu said. I also stood up.

Passing through the gates, the men riding horses appeared.

They were men of different ages, from young ones to those at the prime of their life. They were dressed in clothes which were filthy but easy to move in. On their backs were long rifle-type persuaders.

One by one, they passed through the gate without any caution and climbed down their horses. The plaza, which was not so spacious to begin with, was filled with horses and men.

The men raised a cheer over their reaping. Then they immediately began to load the boxes onto their saddles.

“Twenty-two,” Master Shizu said.

“As we’re told, they’re all men.”

“Almost all of their persuaders are rifles, eh? Just as I thought. How convenient.”

“Will you do it?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Master Shizu answered.

He strapped his goggles on and wore the sword on the belt fastened around his waist over the parka.

Master Shizu walked towards the plaza while I waited by the shade of the house.

The thieves made strange faces upon seeing Master Shizu who looked quite unusual with the parka, sword, and goggles. A number of them immediately took the persuaders from their backs and loaded them.

“Hello.”

Master Shizu spoke in a completely normal tone as he slowly approached. Among the thieves, a bearded middle-aged man who was not doing any work lightly waved his hand to his comrades. Other than a person beside the bearded man who had his rifle-type persuader ready, all the other men returned to loading the boxes on their saddles.

“Yo, brother. You’re not from this country, are you?” the bearded man said. Master Shizu stopped from a distance, and stood in front of them.

“Yes, I’m a traveler. I just arrived here yesterday.”

“Whether you know it or not, these are our rightful earnings. Don’t interfere, mister with goggles and sword.”

"I'm not interfering," Master Shizu immediately said, and then continued.

"But won't you listen to one last request? I want you to stop troubling the people of this country."

"Huh? Did the leaders here ask you to say that?" the bearded man asked.

"Nope. I'm doing this on my own accord."

"……"

The bearded man looked at Master Shizu with an appalled expression for a while.

"Brother. You won't live long, you know."

"Really?"

With a sour expression, the bearded man admonished and threatened him.

"A person who gets into a fight he cannot win is an idiot. I can say from my experience that you will get yourself killed."

“My thoughts, exactly. By the way, your answer?” While saying so, Master Shizu moved his body lightly and subtly, and approached them with a half-step.

“Huh?”

“Won’t you stop this?” He took another half-step as he spoke.

“……”

The bearded man was dismayed, and this time, he moved his fingers to shoot Master Shizu.

The man took his persuader, aimed at Master Shizu’s heart, and fired at point-blank range. Master Shizu took the sheath with his left hand, held the sword grip in his right hand, and pulled off the sheath with his left. The blade which appeared deflected the bullet obliquely.

Master Shizu took two steps forward, struck the man with his left shoulder, and thrust the sword deeply into his heart. While this man fell to the left, he pulled out his sword and mowed down the neck of the bearded man in front of him. As this guy fell forward, he slashed the man right behind diagonally from the shoulder. All of this took place in roughly four seconds.

Blood spurted around Master Shizu in an interesting manner, making splattering sounds in the background. As a result, the waterproof parka became of use to Master Shizu.

Three men down.

The thieves froze in place as they witnessed this scene. They did not realize immediately what was happening.

"Y…y…y…y" A nearby man was trying to say something.

"You bastard!" The words which he was finally able to spit out were his last. Soon, he was impaled through his stomach.

Master Shizu ran, burst through the men who were still working, and skillfully killed each person en route. It was in complete rhythm.

The second man, who was to the right of the first, had his windpipe gouged out with the edge of the blade. The third was disposed of with a direct attack to his chest.

The fourth man, who was carrying a box, had his head and both arms severed. The box fell right below, with his arms still attached.

Master Shizu made a turn while running and vigorously cut down the fifth man’s torso.

As the upper half of the body fell on the ground, Master Shizu ran through the plaza and concealed himself beside a house. One guy who had fast reflexes fired at Master Shizu, but he has already disappeared and was not hit.

Eight dead bodies or rather, ‘humans who were turned into corpses in a blink’ tumbled in the plaza. Meanwhile,

“Damn!” “Kill him!” “Chase him!” “Son of a *****!” “ That bastard!” “That a*****e!” “Beat him to death!”

The thieves shouted out their feelings without reserve.

I turned from the opposite side of the house, took a detour, and ran through the alleyway where Master Shizu headed. Soon, I found Master Shizu waiting in ambush in one corner of a narrow alley.

When I tried to approach, Master Shizu lightly shook his hand, and I stood back aside.

From the corner of the alley, the barrel of a long persuader peeked. Master Shizu pulled it with his left hand and thrust his blade on the throat of the man who appeared. At the same time, a stray bullet flied out and bored through the wall of a house.

“Did you finish him off?” From the other side of the corner, the voices of other thieves were heard. Master Shizu answered.

“Yeah.”

Master Shizu pulled and threw down the man who exposed himself, and he vanished from my sight.

“Ugh—!”

"Damn y—!"

The voices of two people were heard. And then, Master Shizu returned, shaking off the blood from his sword.

When I approached, he asked me, "Three guys here, so only half of them are left?"

I nodded.

Master Shizu ran through the alley without making any sound, and I followed.

We stopped when we crossed a somewhat wide alley. We heard voices from the direction of the plaza.

"Someone fired."

"Did they kill him?"

I lowered my nose and peeked. I saw three men coming towards our direction with their persuaders poised and bodies in half-crouching position.

I informed Master Shizu the number of opponents. He waited for a while, and after matching the timing, lightly poked his feet behind me.

I jumped out.

"Wha—!" A man was surprised and aimed his persuader towards me. I leaped to the opposite side.

"Damn, it's a dog."

"Don't scare us like that!"

The men approached. Then, Master Shizu jumped out, passed through the man up front, beheading him. Before he could react, a fountain of blood spewed forth from his neck. Immediately after, the man behind received a blow on his chin from Master Shizu's left elbow. Master Shizu moved his right arm longitudinally, moving his sword the same way, piercing through the man's flank.

"Bastard!"

The last man turned his hand persuader towards Master Shizu. Master Shizu threw down the man who ' would soon become a corpse' with his left hand.

The man extended his arms and fired. It was too close. Master Shizu stepped up front to the right, and simply moved away from the line of fire. The man raised the persuader with both hands, and as he lifted it neck-high it fell in front of him.

“Eh?”

The man looked at his arms. They have become shorter . Blood curiously spurted out from them in rhythm with his heartbeat. Master Shizu grasped the man’s collar and stepped away from the corner I was in.

“Ah—? Ah—? Ah—?”

The man noisily flapped his arms, as if playing ‘ otedama’ [13] At that moment, I saw Master Shizu’s shadow, about two feet away from the man, aiming.

Whoosh—! Boom.

There was the sound of a bullet cutting through the air , followed by the sound of a head exploding. Half of the head of the man Master Shizu grabbed vanished. He

slightly dragged and flung the sacrifice, and went back to my corner. Immediately, he fired several bullets onto the wall.

“Just eight left.”

Master Shizu made a little run and proceeded to the interior of the alley. On the way, he pulled the string of his goggles and cleared the visor which has become dirty with blood. He also wiped off a piece of brain that splattered on his cheek.

Master Shizu, and me who was following behind, came to the place where the alleys bend back and forth complicatedly every few steps. Master Shizu deliberately flapped his parka and dropped blood all over the place. He went to and fro the same place.

And then he set his back against the wall of a house in a corner and quietly waited.

After some time, voices echoing from the walls were heard.

“Hey, let’s get outta here. The boss is already dead.”

"Are you going to let it end like this?! Let's beat that guy to death!"

"But"

"Shut up!"

The two men approached noisily.

Master Shizu waited in silence. The footsteps came closer.

The men were drawn in by the bloodstains. They went towards three more in the opposite direction. Master Shizu jumped out. He confirmed the alley the two went into in one glance, and gave chase. I followed.

He caught up with the two as they turned around a bend. Master Shizu joined them from behind as if the three of them were comrades.

Master Shizu quietly turned one of the men before him from the back with his left hand. He covered his mouth and pierced his flank.

He released the man who died silently, and did the same thing to the second man.

“Six more.”

Master Shizu escaped the alley which was perfect for hide-and-seek, and nimbly ran through the town while checking both sides.

Master Shizu stopped all of a sudden, and I collided with his back.

Someone spoke. “Damn, another dead end.”

“Over here.”

I heard noisy running steps and impatient voices.

Master Shizu ran towards the direction of the voices. The two men ran towards the plaza. Master Shizu deliberately showed himself, and called out from behind the two with a big voice.

“Are you done?”

“Y-you bastard!”

One man was surprised, turned around and opened fire. The amateur shot completely missed. As if making fun of him, Master Shizu backed away a little from the aim of the second bullet.

Master Shizu gestured at me, and disappeared to the back of the alley.

The man who fired, still poising his persuader, came towards my direction. The man behind pulled his shoulder, and stopped him.

“Don’t chase him anymore!”

“But!”

“Don’t you get it? There’s no use getting killed in battle here. Let’s back off now!” the man behind said coolly.

He was right. The alleyways which could only fit one person were all memorized by Master Shizu, and he can win over them by silently laying ambush. The long persuaders they were wielding are a disadvantage in this kind of battlefield.

While I was thinking about this, Master Shizu, who took a detour from the back alley, jumped out and cut off the head of the calm man.

While the other man was surprised by the shower of blood before him, the blade thrust right through his heart .

“Four left, eh?”

“They’re not nearby,” I answered while chasing after Master Shizu.

“It will be bad if they get away.”

Master Shizu ran to the gate where the men entered. He spied on the plaza from the shadow of the house nearest the gate.

On the plaza where the corpses stumbled and the horses were standing, there were four people. Three of them were forcibly piling up the food on their horses. They were trying to drag the stubborn goat.

One person shouted. "Hey! Are you trying to get away by yourselves?!" He tried to pull a nearby man from his horse.

"Shut up!" The man pulled out his revolver and fired. Two shots to the chest.

"Three left," Master Shizu said.

Immediately, one of the other men rode his horse towards the gate.

Master Shizu, who considered passing through my side, backed down a few steps. And then he ran towards the house.

"Hup—!"

Master Shizu climbed up the wall, scaled it in a moment, and extended his right hand horizontally. His sword grazed the horse's ear and hit the rider's throat, and then he jumped off to the other side.

Master Shizu landed. The headless horseman rode for a short distance, but soon the horse stopped and he fell over.

"Two more," Master Shizu said, and slowly came out from the corner.

Those 'two' were finished loading up their horses, and was about to straddle them. They stopped as they saw the flying head of their comrade and Master Shizu appearing without hesitation.

Master Shizu walked towards the plaza as if taking a stroll. I separated myself from him a bit.

"D-die!" The man who shot his comrade, aimed his persuader at Master Shizu. Master Shizu simply stared. The man fired.

The first two shots missed. The third shot to the shoulder, and the fourth shot to the flank, were deflected by Master Shizu with his blade.

Master Shizu continued to walk. With an expression of shock on his face, the man continued to pull the trigger.

Click, click, click

"Eep–!"

The man threw the cylinder sideways and discarded the empty cartridge. From his waist belt, he took out a bullet reloader. And then,

“Eep—!”

Both his hands trembled so much that the bullets won’t get in. His hands were trembling and his teeth were clacking in fear.

Master Shizu’s footsteps came closer.

“E-eep—! ——Aack—!”

His frantic efforts were in vain, and the bullets fell from the reloader and scattered on the floor.

“Waah!”

The man threw away his revolver. It flew towards an empty space, and fell with a thud. Master Shizu vanished from the man’s field of vision.

The man’s eyes opened curiously. Our gazes met for a moment. At the same time, blood began to gush out from the throat of the man behind him, who stood rigidly in his place, and fell.

“Hey”

“Aaah!” From behind, the man’s right shoulder was pierced by a blade.

Master Shizu started asking questions.

“You guys, do you have any comrades?”

The man still stood on attention, and answered obediently.

“N-n-n-n-n-n-n-none!”

“Will there be an organization looking for you if you’re gone?”

“None!”

“You people do not have any proper training for battle. How come you were doing something like banditry?”

"B-b-b-b-because it's easy. N-no, before we were farmers, but…, it was hard and painful… so we ran away from our country…"

"And so, you're extorting from a small country?"

"Y-yes. L-life is not easy, you know!"

"…Yeah, you can say that again."

The man was happy upon hearing Master Shizu agree, and turned his head and glanced at him. And with a somewhat twitchy smile, he spoke.

"I-isn't it?"

Master Shizu smiled gently.

"That will be over, too." Master Shizu moved his hand as he spoke.

"Huh?" were the man's last words.

The face with the twitchy smile rolled on the ground, still smiling.

Master Shizu collected the riderless horses and tied them together. He removed his goggles and wiped his face. He took off his parka and rolled it. He looked for a place not wet with blood, and placed the parka and the goggles there.

“Master Shizu,” I spoke.

“Hmm?”

“Good job.”

“Stop it,” Master Shizu shook his head with a bitter smile.

“Killing people as a specialty — that’s not something worth praising or something to be proud of.”

A considerable time passed before the residents timidly came out of their houses.

After he was finished wiping his sword and returning it to its sheath, Master Shizu leisurely sat waiting at the plaza.

Surprised screams were heard as the corpses were discovered all over the alleys.

Soon, a crowd gathered in the center of the plaza, the surroundings of which was dyed deep red with the corpses’ blood. As one would expect, there were no children.

Surrounding from a distance, the people looked at Master Shizu with surprised eyes.

“…Mister traveler. You killed them all? With a sword? ” One man spoke. Master Shizu stood up.

“Yes”

“A-all of them…?” Another man asked.

With a countenance which was neither too happy nor sad, Master Shizu replied in an expressionless tone.

“Every single one of them. Twenty-two people. They do not have any comrades. From here on, you do not have to prepare food for them. You can go back to your original lives.”

When the people heard this, an expression of relief ran through their faces.

But this only lasted for a moment. Eventually, they turned a discerning eye at Master Shizu, who seemed to have transformed completely from the previous day. I saw the men speaking in low voices.

When Master Shizu realized the result of what he has done, he lightly closed his eyes for a short time.

“This is too much…”

The words of one man caused a spark.

“That’s right. No matter how you look at it, this is overkill. It’s too cruel,” another man said.

“But, this is…, it would have been better if they weren’t killed! And every single one of them, too. Don’t you agree, everyone?” A man raised his voice.

The people’s faces became cold. ‘That’s true,’ they answered. Everyone looked at Master Shizu from a distance with cold, sharp eyes.

One man took a few steps forward.

“Mister traveler. Do you realize what you have just done?” the man said.

“You’re a murderer!”

“……”

Master Shizu remained silent and listened to the man’s words.

“We, the people of this country, for whatever reason, couldn’t bear the thought of hurting people, much less killing them. It is evil. We must not kill. Am I wrong, everyone?”

Voices of agreement rose from the crowd, much louder than before.

"Mister traveler, we are different from you. We cannot approve of using violence against people, even if it's only a little. We do not recall begging you to present us with a mountain of corpses."

"That's right. I did all of this on my own accord," Master Shizu said austerely, while he gazed back at the people glaring at him.

"Mister traveler, we don't want people like you in our country. Please leave this country immediately. This is what all of us think," said a man who was acting as the representative of the residents.

Master Shizu gave a small nod. "I understand. —— Someone, please bring me my bag. It's in the assembly hall."

Soon the bag was brought before Master Shizu.

Master Shizu expressed his gratitude and hung his parka and goggles on the bag. With his sword still on his waist, Master Shizu carried the bag.

"I'm truly sorry for the trouble, but I'll leave the disposal of the corpses to you. The persuaders and the

horses though, still have plenty of use. Everything belongs to you," Master Shizu said. No one said a word in reply. They all stared towards Master Shizu coldly.

"Thank you for letting me stay. Well then, I'll be taking my leave," Master Shizu politely thanked them.

"Let's go, Riku," Master Shizu walked and headed towards the open gates.

And I followed.

—

Master Shizu rode the buggy through the forest road. He was going slower than usual. The sunbeams streaming through the leaves flickered on the buggy.

Even when I looked back, the small country beyond the trees and the valley can no longer be seen.

I asked from the passenger seat, "Are you disappointed?"

Master Shizu shook his head. His expression as he gripped the steering wheel was the same as always.

"That place is their country. And that was their choice. We have to honor it," Master Shizu said. And then he added,

"I wasn't expecting anything more. This is good enough."

"They sponged off on you, didn't they?" I asked.

"Yeah. They are a strong people," Master Shizu nodded.

I asked just one more question.

"Did you like that country?"

Master Shizu smiled a little.

"Who knows?"

“Land with a Bridge” —Their Line—

Chapter Ten

"Land With a Bridge"

— Their Line —

A single motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was running on a sandy beach.

It was a motorrad loaded with traveling luggage on top and on both sides of its rear wheel. It was headed towards the north, leaving thin tire tracks on the relatively hard sand near the beach.

On the left side was the expanse of the clear blue and calm ocean. On the right was a large desert, with its thousands of rippling sand dunes. It was a world of water and sand.

The motorrad's driver was wearing a black jacket with a wide belt fastened around the waist. Suspended on her right thigh was a holster for a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol). Placed inside was a high-caliber revolver.

The driver was wearing a brimmed hat with flaps covering the ears, and silver-framed goggles. It was a young person whose age was probably a little over mid-teens.

Suddenly, the driver tapped the tank of the motorrad, and pointed ahead.

At a considerable distance, a white line which looked like the shimmer of hot air can be seen floating on the blue surface. As they came closer, they realized what the line was. It was a bridge.

It was a large bridge.

A number of bridge piers [14] rising from the ocean were systematically lined up. White stones were put together to form arches. The width has just enough allowance for a big car to pass through it. Its height from the water surface was around the height a person can jump.

The bridge rose abruptly from the desert, earnestly continuing straight towards the west, and vanished with the horizon.

The motorrad arrived at the edge of the bridge. The driver got off and looked up.

The driver made a little conversation with the motorrad about the place.

'For sure, this is the bridge that we're looking for. If we cross it, we can get to the neighboring continent without having to pay for a ferry,' the driver said happily.

On the other hand, the motorrad found it odd. Why is it that such a splendid bridge was there in a place where no one lives in? And where did the large quantities of building material of white stone came from?

The traveler who told the driver about this bridge could not find anyone who could tell him the answer to these questions. Even so, it didn't matter to the driver. She added that the important thing was that the bridge exists. The motorrad agreed.

The motorrad asked whether they will be able to cross by the end of the day. The driver answered frankly that it would not be possible because of the distance. She said that she was planning to camp out on top of the bridge and finish crossing it by the next day.

The driver launched the motorrad and began to run on the bridge.

The bridge's stone paving was made of small stones put together systematically. Its surface was smoothed out and had a glassy appearance. On top of it, the motorrad continued to run comfortably. On both sides of the road, the neatly crafted stone handrails continued on.

After running for a while, nothing but the ocean can be seen all around. The shining blue surface of the water was perfectly divided by the white bridge. Just ahead, the land on the other side falls and disappears with the horizon.

As the motorrad headed west, the sound of its engine resounded noisily over the ocean.

Soon, the day quietly came to an end. When the setting sun began to shine golden on the bridge and water surface, the driver stopped the motorrad.

Night came, and the ocean became dark and quiet. It was as if everything in the earth was flattened, while the stars shone in the sky. The driver complained of the dazzling starlight.

And on top of the bridge, she spread out the blanket, wrapped herself in it and slept.

The next day.

The driver woke up at dawn. The sky had a weak purple color.

She performed some light exercises, and then trained with and maintained the persuader on her right thigh. She ate her breakfast of portable rations. From the cans tied on top of her bag, she took some water for herself and replenished the tank of the motorrad with fuel.

The sun rose. The cloudless sky and the wave-free ocean were stained blue. The driver slapped awake the motorrad and rode towards the west once more.

It was about noon.

'Stop,' the motorrad suddenly spoke in a loud voice.

The driver quickly hit the brakes. They came to a halt at the center of the ocean.

'I saw something,' the motorrad said. The driver turned the motorrad, and rode back a little as she was told.

The motorrad told the driver to look at a particular handrail they passed through earlier that day. This handrail had exactly the same shape as the rest. The driver was doubtful, and asked why.

The motorrad said that some characters were carved on it. The driver got off the motorrad and examined the handrail. She took off her gloves and touched the surface with her hand.

The driver confirmed that the characters were there, but it was weathered all over that the writings cannot be

read anymore. The motorrad suggested that he would read instead. He would also read what the carved characters were in the previous handrails.

The driver thought for a while. And then, she answered that since they can't waste much time, he had to read the gist of the writings. If there was nothing interesting, they'll leave right away.

The motorrad agreed and read the writings on the first handrail.

'We have to fulfill our duty. We have to build a bridge here. As to why, we will leave it in the handrails. It is for that someone who will cross this bridge someday.'

The driver cut the motorrad's engine right away. In a moment, the sound vanished in the area.

The driver pushed the motorrad and went to the next handrail. She asked the motorrad to read all of the writings in succession.

The motorrad agreed, and read the fading characters——

'We lived by the beach on the eastern side of the bridge. Over there were the walls of our country. As to why we started to live in a world of sand, a barren land, we haven't known for a long time. It didn't really matter to us, and we lived our lives in pleasure; eating fish, singing, and dancing.'

'Near the country, there were a number of enormous structures we call pyramids. White stones were neatly piled up to build these structures, but as to who, when, or for what purpose they were built, we can only guess. But more than that, the structures were convenient to us. We take the stones and use them to build houses, build roads and repair the walls.'

'One day, our comrades discovered something from the bottom of the ocean, and salvaged it. It was something like a big vault. After some difficulty in opening it, we found a lot of documents inside. We felt very disappointed because we thought there was something valuable in it.'

'But through these documents, we came to know the answer to our questions. Why are we here? What are we supposed to do? What have we been doing until now? What are we supposed to do from now on?'

'One of the documents was a blueprint for a bridge. From the beach right before us, a beautiful arch bridge with a number of bridge piers made up of stone will be built beyond the horizon, crossing into the neighboring continent. It was a magnificent plan. The huge amount of blueprints was for the sake of this plan.'

'In another document, two facts were specified clearly. One, enough quantities of the stone material that will be used for building the bridge shall be piled up on the beach. Another, the imprisoned criminals shall be allowed to inhabit an area nearby, and shall be made as workers for the construction of the bridge. When the

bridge is completed, the sentence of all the prisoners will be erased, and they will be allowed entry to the original country.'

'The answers to the four questions above are these: We were entrusted with a mission. We were to build a bridge . This fact was ignored and concealed, and we lived our lives in pleasure; eating fish, singing and dancing. And lastly——'

'There is only one thing we were asked to do. "Build the bridge as instructed." All of the citizens held one opinion. The detailed blueprints are there. The necessary materials are also there. There are also a lot of people who have seen the olden days. There was no reason for us not to do it, or not to be able to do it.'

'If the bridge is completed, the decision of returning to the original country, or staying in this land is left to a person's own judgment. Hope budded in our hearts, that we will be able to find the place where we belong. Since we already achieved the reason why we are here, we started to build the bridge.'

'The construction of the bridge progressed slowly but steadily. As indicated in the blueprints, the bridge piers

should be able to rise from the water, and stones that can be submerged should be used. Such stone can be found inside the pyramids. The stones will be floated to their designated location, and then holes will be opened to put them together while they are submerged. Then sand will be poured on the finished foundation to make a sturdy bridge pier. We were very happy each time we finished one pier, and we continued to gather the stones and extend the bridge'

'People who are good at diving built the bridge piers in the sea. Some carried the stones from the beach. Those who have strength put together the stones. Those who are skilled polished the surface beautifully. When we have come this far, some caught fish from the top of the bridge. And others cooked them. We shared the work, shifted roles, and our everyday life continued this way. Each day we completed something, and find it wonderful.'

The motorrad read up to this point, and the driver said, 'I see,' with a look of admiration. She stroked the stone paving by her feet, tapped the handrail before her, and looked down at a bridge pier nearby.

The motorrad asked whether to continue reading, or to leave now that the mystery was solved.

The driver wondered as to why the country vanished and as to why the people who built the bridge were nowhere to be found. Was it because they all came back to the original country? She said that she wanted to know these things.

The motorrad agreed to go on reading the next one——

'When our children, who were born around the same time as the bridge, have started to contribute to the work

on the bridge, we noticed something. As indicated in the plans, there should be enough stone material for use in the bridge. But there were only a few left. We soon understand the reason. It was because we used them in building our houses and repairing the walls. We were deeply embarrassed by our foolishness, and started to fear that the bridge will not be completed.'

'There was only one way to solve our problem. We demolished our houses and started to use those stones instead. We wasted so much time in processing the stones that the progress of the construction slowed down . The people who lost their homes had to live with other people, and that became another problem. However regrettable it may be, it is for the completion of the bridge.'

'Other than demolishing the houses, we also started to use the walls. Though it appears unnecessary, we carved away the stone just in case. There were no offensive countries nearby, but without the walls, the country became covered with sand. Without the walls, we decided to build the houses on top of the bridge. And while we were living there, the bridge continued to stretch out.'

'Before we know it, the walls and the houses in the country were all gone, and the land turned back into a desert. We did not care about this, and we continued to slowly, but steadily accomplish our mission. The bridge extended. However, we were worried that someday, there will not be enough stone material to use. We worried about it constantly.'

'And at last, after all our progress, we saw something other than the horizon. In our field of view, we could see a desert in the opposite shore. Our happiness during that time is impossible to leave in these writings.'

'We used up all of the stone material for the last part of the construction. Now, we no longer doubt the completion of our plans. There was only enough stone. One by one, we dismantled our houses, and used the stones from them. We slept on top of the bridge. The number of people whose bodies were broken down increased, but we paid no heed.'

'When all of the stones are gone, we would know whether the bridge would be completed or not.'

'We completed the bridge, except for some parts. It was around the center of the bridge, where the last house

was located. We began to notice when we took some stones from there to put together the bridge. Just in that place, there was no stone paving; the rough stone was exposed in a long cavity. It was a foolish mistake.'

'The bridge is totally useless because of this long and large cavity. To fill this cavity and complete the bridge as indicated in the plans, we need more stone. There can't be any more in the desert. And we definitely cannot take some stones from other parts of the bridge.'

'We tried a number of experiments. We hardened the sand and made them into bricks. It didn't work. We tried to fill up the cavity with large quantities of sand. The people who stepped on it sank. We thought of going somewhere far to get some stones. It was useless talk.'

'We ran out of ideas, and did nothing but regret our foolishness. There should have been enough materials from the beginning. There was no one to blame but us, for wasting them in making houses and walls. It was our fault. We could only beat ourselves, while looking at the cavity that can't be filled up right before our eyes.'

'It was after a while. The only thing left is to fill in this cavity. Only that and the bridge will be complete. We

wanted something hard to use instead of the stone paving. We agonized and thought about it, and eventually, we found a wonderful solution to our dilemma. If you think about it, it's pretty simple. We had the ingredients we needed right from the start.'

'Among ourselves, we chose weak old people and women, and we killed them. We scraped the flesh from the corpses. We obtained large quantities of the white and hard bones. Surely this is the final ingredient needed to fill in the cavity. We readied large quantities, and lined them up without allowing gaps.'

'The hole was filled in slowly. Next, we killed all of the children and obtained their bones. The bones of children are small and weak, and breaks once stepped on, so we made little progress. Even so, the flesh was very helpful in catching fish.'

'Lastly, we decided to kill men in turn. The bones of men are large and hard. As the cavity became smaller, we became happy from the bottom of our hearts. We collected and lined up the bones from the legs and arms as well as the ribs, and filled in the gaps with smashed skulls. We were making favorable progress.'

'And so all of the cavity was filled in. No one was left but me, but it's no problem. I can do the rest on my own. I just have to line up the spines, and to polish the surface like what was done with the stone pavement…. Yes, we can complete the bridge, and that's the reason why I was left here. In other words——'

—

The driver asked what's next after 'in other words'. The motorrad told her that this was the last of the characters. With a look of admiration in her face, she said that even though the last person's whereabouts were unknown, he must have been here.

'What's that?' the driver heard, as the motorrad urged her to look at her feet. It was subtly different from the other stone pavings. The driver crouched, and upon examining it well, raised a voice of surprise and admiration.

Over there, human spines were put together. The destroyed spines were lined up as if drawn in a pattern.

The color was slightly different from the other parts, and thin bones were inlaid in the gaps. Furthermore, the surface had a glassy finish.

The driver raised her face. The bone portion continued for a while, and then returned to the same stone pavement.

On top of the white line amidst this blue world, the driver thought for a while. She thought about something while looking afar.

Then she turned to the motorrad. She said they're going to stay here for today.

The motorrad was surprised, and asked for the reason. 'My three-day rule,' was the short reply of the driver.

The driver fixed the puzzled motorrad firmly on its center stand. She took down the luggage from the carrier on top of the rear wheel.

'Right, I can relax and fish for today. I should eat fish from time to time.' Upon saying this, the driver rummaged inside the boxes on both sides of the rear wheel. She took out a thread and a fish hook.

‘You don’t have a rod,’ said the motorrad.

The driver opened the big bag. A disassembly-type rifle persuader was strapped on the inside of the cover. The driver took it, connected the front and rear portions together and snapped them in place with a pin. [15] She attached the thread with the fish hook and sinker on the tip of the barrel. As well as the bell.’

‘Master’s gonna cry if she sees this,’ said the motorrad.

Though slightly different from an appropriate bait, the driver used the portable rations, let down the thread, and sat in front of the handrails. She took off her hat and gazed leisurely at the sky. And then she slowly made a big stretch.

‘Hey, can you really fish with that?’ the motorrad asked.

‘Who knows,’ the driver answered.

—

In the blue ocean, there was a completely straight white bridge.

It was a magnificent bridge that crosses the ocean. Over there, one motorrad was parked. Beside was a lone human, fishing with a rifle.

Just a little bit away from there, there was a part where the stone pavement was slightly different from the rest.

The color was subtly different and it was patterned. Looking at it from above, there was something written in big letters.

Over there was the continuation of the writings:

'We have fulfilled our duty.'

“The Tower Country” —Free Lance—

Chapter Eleven

"The Tower Country"

— Free Lance —

There was a traveler named Kino. Despite her young age, she was very skillful with persuaders (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol), and almost no one could surpass her.

Kino’s partner in her travels was a motorrad called Hermes (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). His back seat was turned into a carrier, and was piled with tons of luggage. Since Kino was a traveler , she was visiting many countries.

—

Once, Kino and Hermes saw a very high tower beyond the forest up ahead. Because it was extremely high, it could be seen even from a rather great distance and it looked like a thread hanging down from the clouds.

After Kino and Hermes arrived there, they discovered a country surrounded by common walls with the brick tower in the center of it.

When they entered the country, they saw a great number of people working hard beside the tower.

"Welcome, traveler. Please feel free to take a look around," said a citizen of this country.

Greeting him, Kino asked gently:

"What a magnificent tower. If you don't mind, can you tell me how long it took to build it, and what the purpose of its construction is?"

"It took 230 years, but no one knew why it was built," the man said without hesitation, and then continued:

"The construction of the tower started long ago, even before letters were created. The purpose is a matter of no consequence. This tower is what makes our life worth living."

The next day Kino woke up at the crack of dawn.

When the sun has risen significantly, Kino slapped the sleepyhead Hermes as usual and they went to view the tower. Since the weather was great, even the highest points of the tower were visible, though barely.

Near the tower, the people were drying the earth carried by the river and were making bricks. The bricks were transported using the stairs in the center of the tower, and the tower grew higher and higher. Sometimes the bricks that were not installed properly fell down from a monstrous height, so it was quite dangerous.

Kino was inspecting the tower very cautiously, but with great interest. Hermes, who usually makes remarks about buildings, muttered weakly:

“Kino, it’s going to fall apart. There are a lot of cracks at its foundation. It can collapse even tomorrow, if there comes a strong wind.”

Kino nodded lightly, but she didn’t tell anyone about this.

A storm arose at night.

The next day, in other words their third day in the country.

While Kino was diligently eating her buffet-style breakfast at the inn, a great noise was suddenly heard from the outside. Someone screamed:

“The tower is falling apart! Be careful at the west side! ”

Kino and other people who were at the inn ran outside . They saw the tower slowly crumbling down. Its foundation became weak and broke into pieces. Unable to hold its weight, the tower collapsed completely in a while.

Soon, after the roaring sound has stopped and the air has been cleared of dust, everyone saw a huge pile of bricks lying at the place where the tower stood earlier.

The people danced atop of it, letting out screams of joy :

"It fell apart! It crumbled!"

"After 230 years!"

"It collapsed in our generation! I've seen it with my own eyes!"

"Yahoo! Congratulations!"

A man spoke to Kino:

"Miss traveler, the tower has finally collapsed. We're so happy that we've witnessed it."

"What are you going to do from now on?" asked Hermes.

The man instantly answered: "Well, of course we are going to build a new one! We'll try our best to build it in such way that it stands for 300 years!"

"I see," said Kino.

Soon the citizens of the country gathered a meeting and started a discussion.

"There's no doubt we must use huge bricks to lay the foundation. And this time let's try to make the tower slightly conical."

"We should also think of the wind. What if we polish the outer bricks? It will probably weaken the force applied to the whole tower."

"Let's talk about the schedule. During the next ten years we will remove the bricks, and work out its design. During the following twenty years we'll make the bricks for the foundation. And during thirty years after that the foundation will be complete. From that time onwards the tower will steadily grow higher."

Kino spoke to the joyfully talking people:

"We are going to leave the country soon. Take care."

And saluted them. The people waved their hands with a smile.

Kino was about to return to the inn, when a man approached and addressed her. He seemed rather impatient.

“Can you do me a favor?!” he said, as if clinging to her . Kino asked what he wants.

“Please take me with you!” said the man.

Kino asked him why, and the man replied:

“I’m fed up with this country. To build a tower just to see it collapse at some point — it’s absurd.”

“……”

“Miss traveler, perhaps you also think that our country is really strange and that we are mad. Please tell me frankly what you think!”

Kino answered honestly:

“I have no idea. I don’t know if it’s everyone who is mad or just you.”

The man made a tearful face and asked Kino:

"I beg you, take me with you. I don't want to live in this country. Help me!"

Kino said that it wasn't possible. The man tried to forcefully persuade her. He said that if she doesn't want to get a painful experience, then— But Kino interrupted and said that in this case they both would be in trouble, and showed him a persuader under her coat.

The man flopped down and burst into tears.

"I'm fed up with such a life…. There's no freedom in this country. If you are against the construction of the tower, then, being a traitor, you'll become a human pillar [16]. What am I supposed to do…"

Kino asked Hermes what "human pillar" means. He explained it simply, and Kino said, "I see."

The man continued to shed tears:

"I don't want to build this tower my whole life. I'd like to do something different than that. But there's no freedom in this country. I want liberty."

Kino glanced at Hermes and then whispered to the man's ear:

"If you don't want to build the tower, just do something else; for example you can make carvings on the bricks. In that case you'll be able to make a great number of magnificent bricks, what do you think?"

"!"

The man suddenly raised up his face. His eyes, a moment ago full of tears, opened wide.

"Of course! It's fun! I like it! I'll do this from now on! I can freely carve different patterns on the bricks!"

The man stood up and while joyfully hopping, rushed to the other people.

"Please listen! From now on I'll be making carvings on the bricks! One by one, they'll become really beautiful decorations!"

The people said unanimously:

"Whoa! Brilliant idea!"

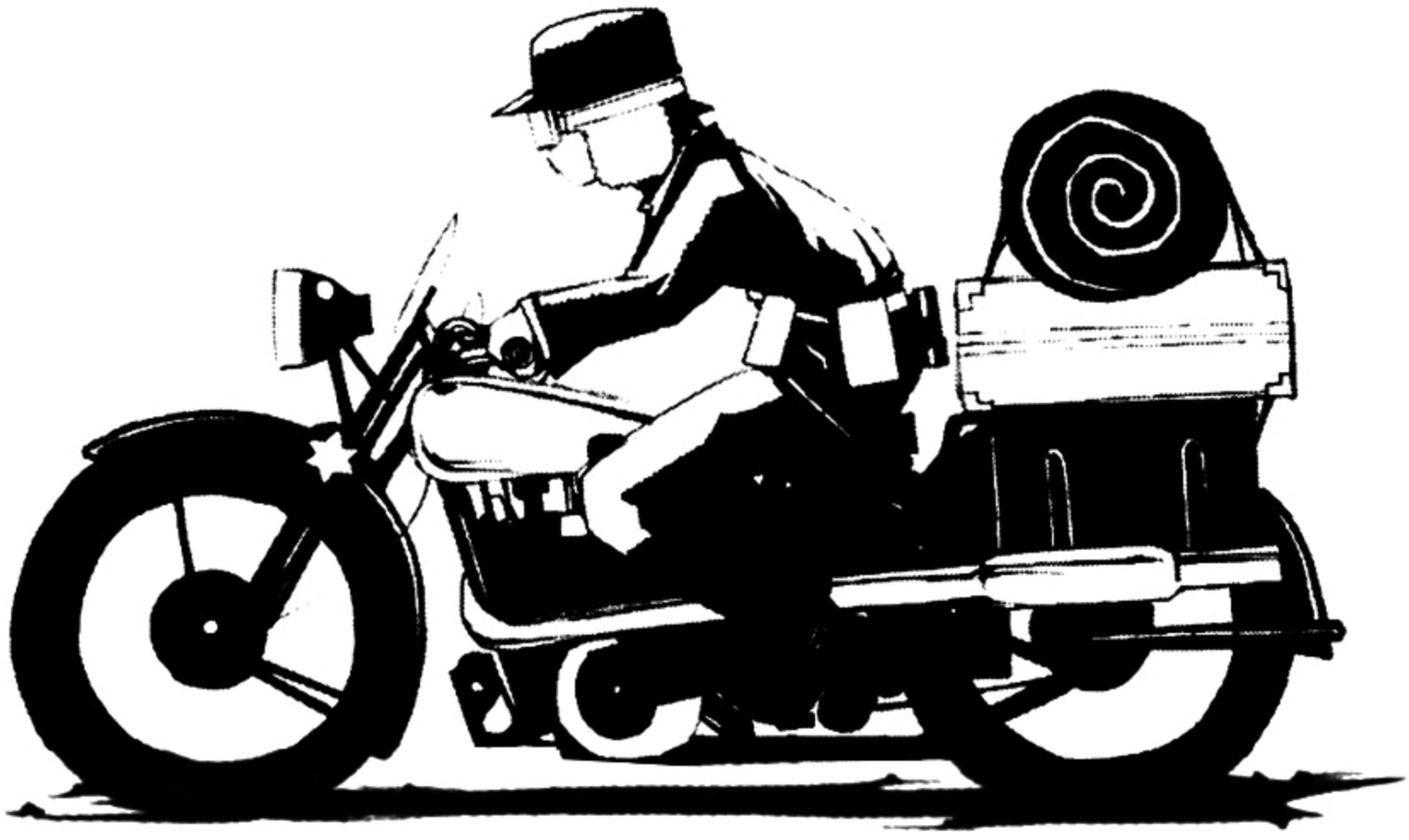
"I agree! We can use it to decorate the stairs, for example! It'll be so wonderful!"

"Alright, people! Let's entrust this to him!"

The man smiled awkwardly.

Kino and Hermes left this place and returned to the inn. They loaded their luggage and left the country.

Kino's journey is far from over, but this story ends here.



“Amidst a Crimson Sea・a” —Blooming Prairiea—

The country was a ruin.

The stone wall has completely crumbled all over the place, unable to perform its purpose. The doors for closing the gates lay collapsed on the ground.

Not a single building remained intact. Either the windows were broken, the ceilings collapsed or the walls fragmented. Some houses were burned, others crushed by a tower which toppled on its side. The roads were buried in piles of brick rubble from ruined buildings.

Under the clear sky, the ruins stood on silently.

Hermes was parked on his center stand near the west gate where there was less debris.

Not a single living person could be seen all around.

Before long, Hermes muttered to himself,

“So boring.”

The sound of footsteps among the ruins was heard. It was Kino returning to Hermes.

Kino was wearing a brown coat and covered from head to toe in dust. She returned ‘Canon’, which she held in her right hand, to its holster.

“How was it, Kino?” Hermes asked.

“Not a single person in sight, just bones here and there . Most of them must have been buried underneath the rubble,” Kino answered coldly as she brushed away the dust off her clothes.

“What was the cause? Earthquake? Tornado? What do you think?”

“No idea,” Kino replied simply and climbed on Hermes.

“No use stopping here, we won’t be coming back a second time, either.”

“Sure.”

Kino started the engine. Its loud rumble echoed throughout the ruins.

Kino gave the ruins one last look as she put on her hat and goggles.

“……”

Then she launched Hermes, rode through the deserted road, and went past the gates.

“I say Kino,” Hermes began.

“Hmm?”

“What are we gonna do next?

“Well…” Kino thought for a while.

They were riding up a large hill at that time, and when they reached its top,

“How about a song?” Kino replied.

A crimson world spread before their eyes. Deep red flowers carpeted the ground from beyond the hill up to the edge of the horizon.

Kino charged Hermes into the bed of flowers; red petals were thrown into the air. Without any warning, Kino turned off the engine.

"Wh...what?!"

Kino ignored the surprised shout from Hermes and let him fall sideways to the ground; she landed onto the bed of flowers, face up.

A countless number of deep red petals scattered about.

Hermes spoke in jest. "How mean. Who could have done such a rude thing?"

"Ahaha!"

Kino laughed gleefully, and took a deep breath while looking at the sky.

And then she started to sing.

Afterward —Preface— [17]

Hello everyone. Thank you for reading this far. As always, this is the author, Keiichi Sigsawa.

'Kino no Tabi' has finally reached its fourth volume. This is all thanks to the readers.

Why, thank you very much for your support! [18]

Because of a sudden turn of events, even this author doesn't know what will happen next (laughs).

This time, I was considering an idea of making Kino's last journey to be that into space. At the onset, it will be revealed that the real enemies are the '*Four Great Demons of the Universe*'. In the final battle, a can opener will accomplish an important role, and the hot bath in the third chapter will serve as foreshadowing. I was quite satisfied when I wrote it down.

Even though I really planned this out since the third volume, making Kino's character more solid seemed a good idea, and it turned out that the first appearance would be here!

I wanted to make Hermes transform into a green spaceship by the end of volume two, but I changed my mind. The plan is crazy in some places so I will just develop what will happen next based on my gut feel (laughs).

I think it would be surprising if I reveal that Riku is actually a spy of the enemy and have Shizu kidnapped using chloroform. Shizu's sword will break into five pieces, and as to what Shizu would do then… Even the author doesn't know the answer to that (laughs). But I haven't decided yet (laughs again).

But there's one thing for sure. The real fight has just begun to determine Kino and Shizu's future. There's more to come.

To defeat one of the '*Four Great Demons of the Universe*', Kino and company will have to obtain the legendary persuader, '*Big Cannon ~Shining Iron Demon Destroyer~*'[19], which even Master cannot get her hands on. Then they will be heading towards the outskirts of the universe.

From here on, the main plot will deal with the mystery to surpass the demon's territory '*Void*', a 'human story'

in a planet they will pass by, and a series of thrilling battles with the enemy's special forces, '*The Forty-Five Color Dark Army*'.

Oh, right. In the final chapter, when they come out twice the astronautical speed, Kino will say, 'But eye drops are bitter.' This will be a big, big hint on what will happen next. Ah, I've written it down (laughs).

In a side story, Master will reappear in a dining room scene, where she would be having a fierce argument with Shizu. I loved this stylish dialogue to such an extent that I wrote a whole chapter without a single narrative.

But the editor said, "It's too long," and I reluctantly cut out some of the dialogue (cries…). Someday, if I get the chance, I would like to explain in detail why Shizu was fixated on grilling using charcoal fire.

Well from here on, the next three volumes or so of ' Kino no Tabi' will be focusing on the main battle, though the development will be fairly hard. The second part will be tasteful; with Kino becoming involved in malicious stock trading after arriving at a certain planet. How will Kino be able to recover after she loses all of her money as well as Hermes? I believe this will be Dengeki Bunko's

first stock trading drama. Twenty volumes are slated for the second part.

And with a sudden turn of events, in the third part, Kino will end up as a student in a certain planet, and will get involved with troublesome situations [20]. The enemy here will be… *drumming noise*… one of her classmates. The one who would play a particularly important role is the mysterious student council president who would take over the school. And then, there will be the reappearance of… oops, I'm not going to tell (laughs). Perhaps, everyone's booing me right now (grins).

There's still more in store for 'Kino no Tabi'. The current plot will end in 34 issues, but there are plans to extend it up to volume 454. I think we will have quite a long partnership, so from here on, I'll work even harder in writing. Please continue your support!

Summer, 2001

Keiichi Sigsawa

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Literally, 'looking at each other'. You can think of it as the equivalent of matchmaking or arranged marriages in Japanese culture.
2. ↑ Hermes' saying for the day. He said *naizeru kanchou*, which translates to 'Captain Nigel', Kino corrects with *naiseikanshou* which means ' intervention'. Sorry, I can't think of a better pun… ^ ^;
3. ↑ This is true. In China, Mandarin ducks are regarded as a symbol of faithfulness and a happy married life.
4. ↑ The unabridged version of the slightly modified part 3 of episode 3 in the anime.
5. ↑ Not sure if it's an expression, but Hermes said something to the effect of, 'If over there, there's those people, right here we have this person', which I assumed to mean that Kino was being naughty like the citizens.
6. ↑ The original (and of course, more detailed) version of the insert story in anime episode 5.
7. ↑ Enclosed in brackets to indicate that the work he's talking about is different.

8. ↑ It means something like, ‘That Master raised a student like this.’ But I rephrased into a similar (modified) English expression…. ^_^
9. ↑ Another Kino no Tabi terminology like ‘persuader ’ and ‘motorrad’. I could not find the word ‘hovee’ in any dictionary.
10. ↑ Hermes did say ‘rest omitted’ hinting that the reader already knows what will follow. Used a lot (with humorous effect) in the spin-off novel, ‘Gakuen Kino’.
11. ↑ *Budou* or ‘Grapes’, likely refers to the old, but not so uncommon English expression ‘sour grapes’.
12. ↑ Film, as in a camera film. The roll case, or reel case, is that cylinder from where you pull the film out of.
13. ↑ A traditional Japanese children’s game, where small bean bags are tossed and juggled, usually accompanied with singing.
14. ↑ Caused me much grief because I don’t know what a ‘pier’ means. Here pier does not refer to those extensions where ships or boats dock. It refers to the architectural meaning. ‘Pier’ here means those columns which support bridges.
15. ↑ It’s the rifle Flute from Volume 5 Chapter 4 “Land of Heroes” —No Hero—.

16. ↑ 人 – A person deliberately buried alive inside a large-scale construction project
17. ↑ Normally, the title should be *atogaki*, which means 'afterword'. However this one is entitled *atogasa*, which sounds to me like 'What happened after is…', hence this title. As a side note, *atogaki* and *atogasa* are identical except for their last characters, and moreover, the hiragana characters for 'ki' and 'sa' are very similar.
18. ↑ Specifically, the author said "*kansha kangeki amearare*", which means something like, 'gratitude and appreciation raining like hail'. After digging for a bit, I read somewhere that this was a pun on a phrase used in times of war, "*ransha rangeki amearare* ", literally, 'bullets being fired blindly like rain and hail'.
19. ↑ Translation borrowed straight from Untuned-Strings' Gakuen Kino translation.
20. ↑ So this is the joke that gave birth to the spin-off series, Gakuen Kino… ^_^